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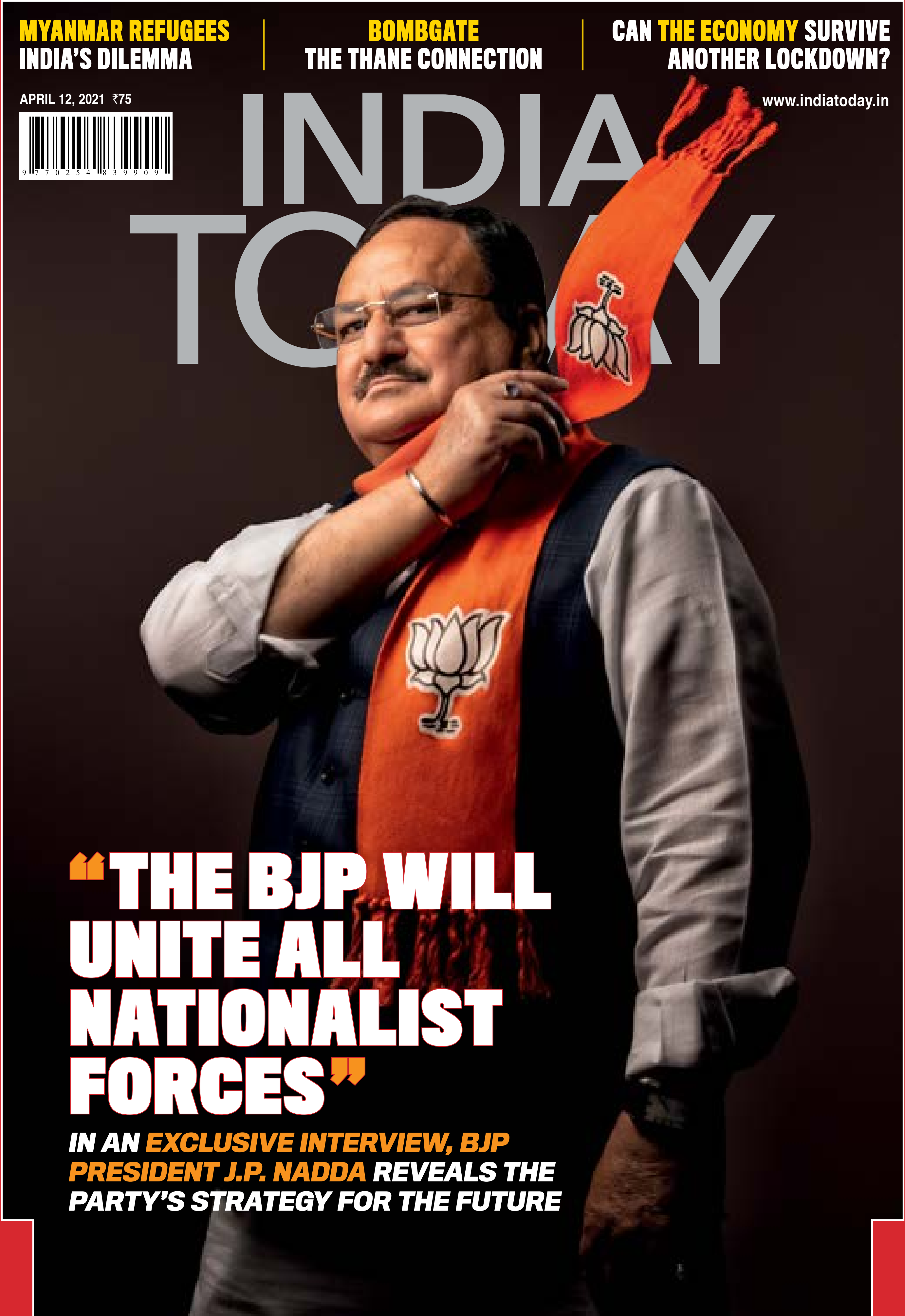

"THE BJP WILL UNITE ALL NATIONALIST FORCES"

IN AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW, BJP PRESIDENT J.P. NADDA REVEALS THE PARTY'S STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE

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FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

One of India's tectonic political shifts has been the metamorphosis of the BJP from the principal opposition grouping to the world's largest party, which claims to have a membership of over 150 million. This change was heralded by the arrival of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party chief Amit Shah on the national scene in 2014. In the past seven years, the BJP has transformed itself into a relentless election fighting machine that seems to be in perpetual campaign mode. This complex organism extends from the heights of national government down to grassroots units such as booth committees earlier to 'page committees' that mobilise voters and cadre, and is constantly being refined. The creation and successful management of such a massive organisation is a stupendous managerial feat, worthy of study by the Harvard Business School. The party has a clear strategy as it fights state and even municipal elections with the same zeal as it does the general elections. It is in power in eight states on its own and in alliance in nine others, governing 48 per cent of India's landmass. Election verdicts do not mark the end of its quest for power. In Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Goa, the party fell short of a majority but formed governments through coalitions or luring representatives from other parties. The Congress government in Rajasthan survived a close call last year. In Puducherry, the BJP is believed to be behind the Narayanasamy government's fall just a few weeks before its term ended. No Opposition-ruled state is safe, especially when it is up against an organisation that never sleeps, never gives up and believes that politics is a 24x7, 365-day calling. It's fair to say that India has never seen another national party as aggressive and well-organised as BJP 2.0.

INDIA TODAY
MISSION 2019

June 6, 2016 cover

Last January, Shah, who deserves most of the credit for creating this formidable poll fighting machine, handed the baton of BJP chief to Jagat Prakash Nadda, a party insider. Nadda has worked with Modi and Shah since 1998 and was, in fact, tipped to succeed Rajnath Singh as party president in 2013. The calm, amiable and methodical leader has been groomed for this post, acting as working president since June 2019. He has big shoes to fill. In the 14 months that he has been party chief, Nadda has overseen the Bihar election, where the BJP not just formed a coalition government but, for the first time, surpassed alliance partner JD(U)'s tally.

The new chief is already in the thick of his biggest challenge yet—steering the party through elections in four of the seven states that form part of the BJP's 'Coromandel Strategy'—the plan to establish a presence in a contiguous territorial swathe from Kerala in the south to West Bengal in the east. First highlighted by Shah in 2016, this region is where the BJP has a minimal political footprint. It is a final frontier, one the party will need to breach before claiming to have a pan-Indian presence, displacing any memories of the Congress in its heyday. Its biggest impediment in the project is the fact that it is regarded as a north Indian party and that Prime Minister Modi has limited appeal in several southern states. Therefore, the assembly elections in Tamil Nadu and Kerala assume a larger significance in its long-term strategy. So far, it remains a marginal player in these states.

For our current issue, Group Editorial Director (Publishing) Raj Chengappa and Senior Editor Anilesh S. Mahajan caught up with Nadda for his most detailed interview yet. The candid, self-assured and disciplined Nadda not only described his party's current strategy but also outlined its future game plan. That plan, in a nutshell, is to aim for continuity, consolidation and scaling up. This strategy is evident in states like Telangana, where the BJP has displaced the Congress as the largest opposition party. It will be seen in states where the party faces key electoral battles in the months ahead: Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Gujarat in 2022; Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh in 2023, before the 2024 general election. As Nadda emphasises, the BJP fights every election to win. Among the major imperatives that emerged in the interview was how his party intends to use nationalism rather than Hindutva as its future strategy, providing us with the cover line: *'The BJP will unify all nationalist forces'.*

It's a clever strategy. Nationalism has a far more pan-Indian appeal than Hindutva, especially in the south, where the BJP is viewed with suspicion. Armed with a long-term vision, the party plans to use Brand Modi to achieve most of its political goals. Nadda says as much, with all the air of a brand manager: "It is the party's responsibility to best utilise his services for the poll campaign."

That said, Modi-itis, or the party's excessive reliance on the prime minister for every election, also runs the risk of not nurturing local leadership. Great parties have taken great falls because of this oversight. The decline of the Congress, it must be remembered, began with their over-reliance on Brand Gandhi and its marginalisation of charismatic regional leaders. The BJP strategy will face its biggest test in the West Bengal election. If it wins, it will try and replicate the formula in other states where it lacks a presence. If it doesn't win, it will need to return to the drawing board to recast its strategy and rework its electoral arithmetic for the elections ahead. This is a given from what we know of the BJP and its relentless big-picture vision so far. Pausing is never an option.

(Aroon Purie)

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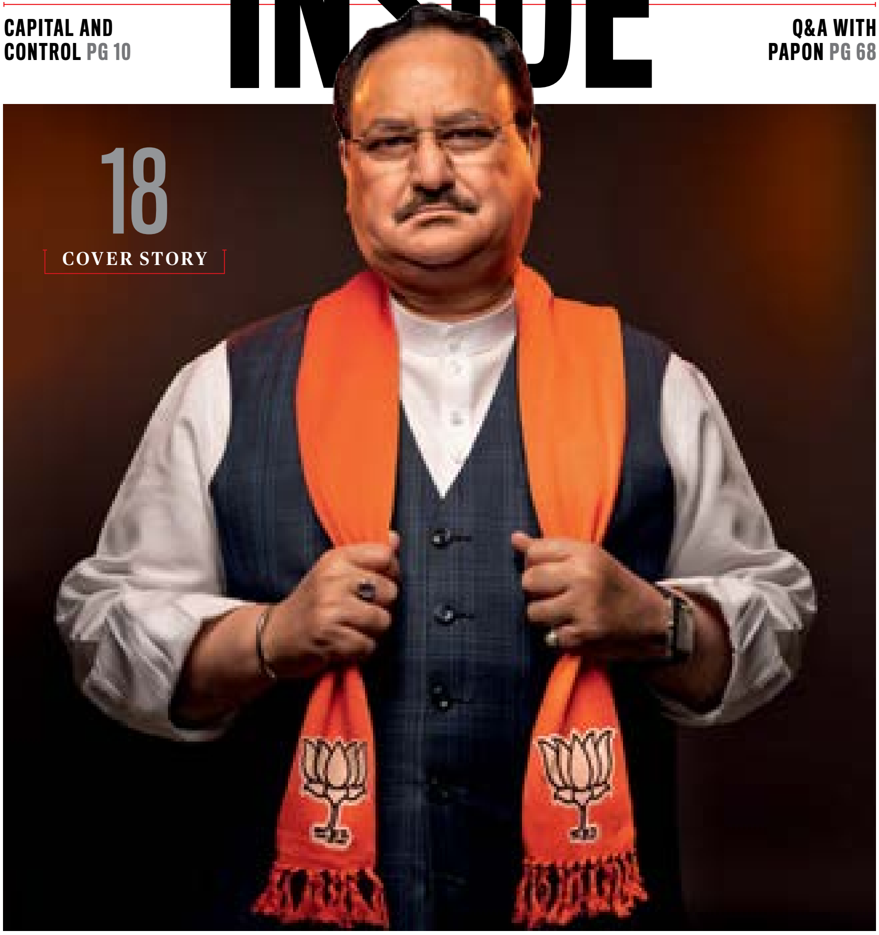

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Cover Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

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पिछले कुछ दिनों में घाटी में आतंकी हमलों में तेजी आई है. एक ओर आतंकी सेना को निशाना बना रहे हैं, तो वहीं सेना भी ऑपरेशन चला

FUTURE TENSE Myanmar refugees at an undisclosed location in Mizoram

AP PHOTO/ANUPAM NATH

MYANMAR REFUGEES

CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

By Kaushik Deka

An unusual face-off between the Centre and the Mizoram government over refugees from Myanmar has once again brought to the fore India's inconsistent stand on dealing with international refugees. Protests have raged across Myanmar since the military coup on February 1 overthrew a democratically elected government. The retaliatory crackdown by security forces has left scores dead and forced hundreds to take shelter in the Indian states bordering Myanmar.

India and Myanmar share a 1,643 km border along Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. Most refugees are police personnel who refused to obey the military junta's orders—to shoot and kill the protesters—with families in tow. They fled fearing persecution, possibly summary execution. Over 700 Myanmar nationals have reached Mizoram and Manipur. Unofficial estimates put their number at over 1,000. Mizoram, which has a 510 km border with Myanmar, is sheltering most of the refugees. They are camping in the districts of Champhai, Hnahthial, Serchhip and Siaha.

The Centre has taken a tough stand against this influx in light of New Delhi's close ties with Tatmadaw, Myanmar's powerful military, which has often supported Indian security forces in their crackdowns on insurgent groups in the Northeast. Many such groups have bases in Myanmar. Min Aung Hlaing, the military leader of Myanmar, has also been a vocal critic of China's support to a rebel group in his country, the Arakan Army. This was one of the reasons India maintained ties with the Myanmar military even when the country had a democratic government in power. India was among the eight countries that attended a military parade in Myanmar on March 27.

On February 25, the Union ministry

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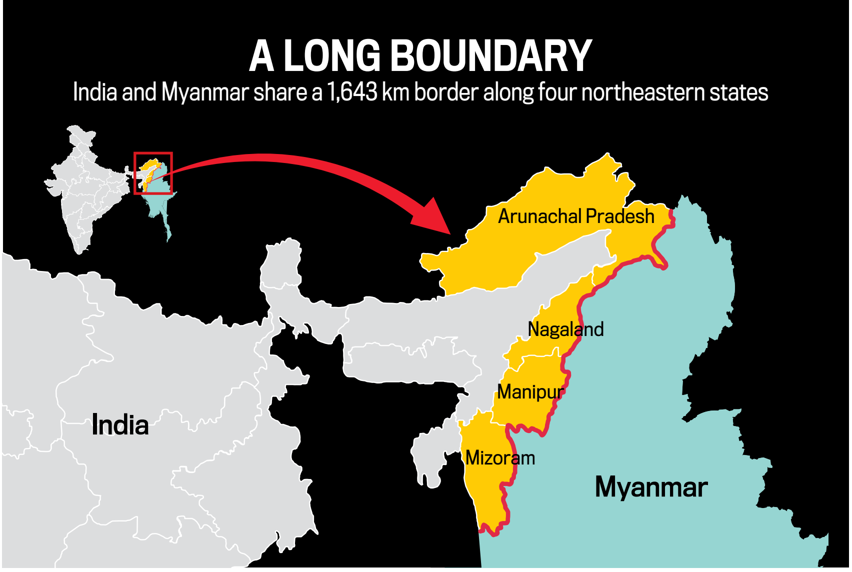


A LONG BOUNDARY

India and Myanmar share a 1,643 km border along four northeastern states

Graphic by ASIT ROY

Map not to scale

of home affairs (MHA) directed the chief secretaries of Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh as well as the Assam Rifles, which guards the Myanmar border, to stop the refugee influx. On March 10, the MHA said the refugees who had entered be deported.

Mizoram chief minister Zoramthanga has publicly expressed displeasure over the directives. In a March 18 letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, he said India could not turn a blind eye to the 'humanitarian crisis unfolding in our backyard'. 'Myanmar areas bordering Mizoram are inhabited by Chin communities, who are ethnically our Mizo brethren with whom we have had close contact all these years, even before India became independent. Mizoram cannot remain indifferent to their sufferings today,' the letter stated.

Religion also binds Mizo tribes with the Chin ethnic groups. Mizoram is predominantly Christian as are the Chin people of Buddhist-majority Myanmar. Marriages are often arranged across the border and people from both sides regularly cross over for work and to meet relatives.

Large parts of the Myanmar-India border are unmanned and unfenced. The Free Movement Regime (FMR) between the two countries allows people to travel up to 16 km into each other's countries and stay there for 14 days. Mizoram depends on Myanmar for essential commodities such as beef, pork, high-quality rice, fruits and household utensils. Mizoram sends across items scarce in Myanmar, such as medicines and fertilisers. "The inter-generational cross-border linkages are very different from how one would study these borders on paper," says Ruhee Neog, director of the Delhi-based Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies.

The refugees have found a groundswell of support among Mizos and their civil society groups. Mizo village councils have issued statements expressing willingness to accommodate Chin refugees. The Mizoram government has issued a standard operating procedure (SOP) to facilitate the refugees' stay in the state. Zoramthanga, on February 24, told the state assembly that his government was ready to provide assistance to civilians fleeing the Myanmar regime. The SOP, however, was revoked following a directive from the Centre.

In 2011, the Centre had circulated an SOP to all states and Union territories for dealing with foreign refugees. Cases that can prima facie be justified on grounds of persecution based on race, religion, sex, nationality, ethnic identity and membership of a social group or political opinion can be recommended to the MHA for a long-term visa (LTV), following a security clearance. The final decision to grant LTVs, though, rests with the Centre.

Two days after Zoramthanga's letter to the PM, a Mizoram delegation, which included two MPs from the state, met MoS for home Nityanand Rai and requested help for the Myanmar refugees. K. Vanlalvena, the sole representative of the ruling Mizo National Front in the Rajya Sabha, met vice-president Venkaiah Naidu and said that deporting the refugees would endanger their lives. But the Centre remains firm on its stand.

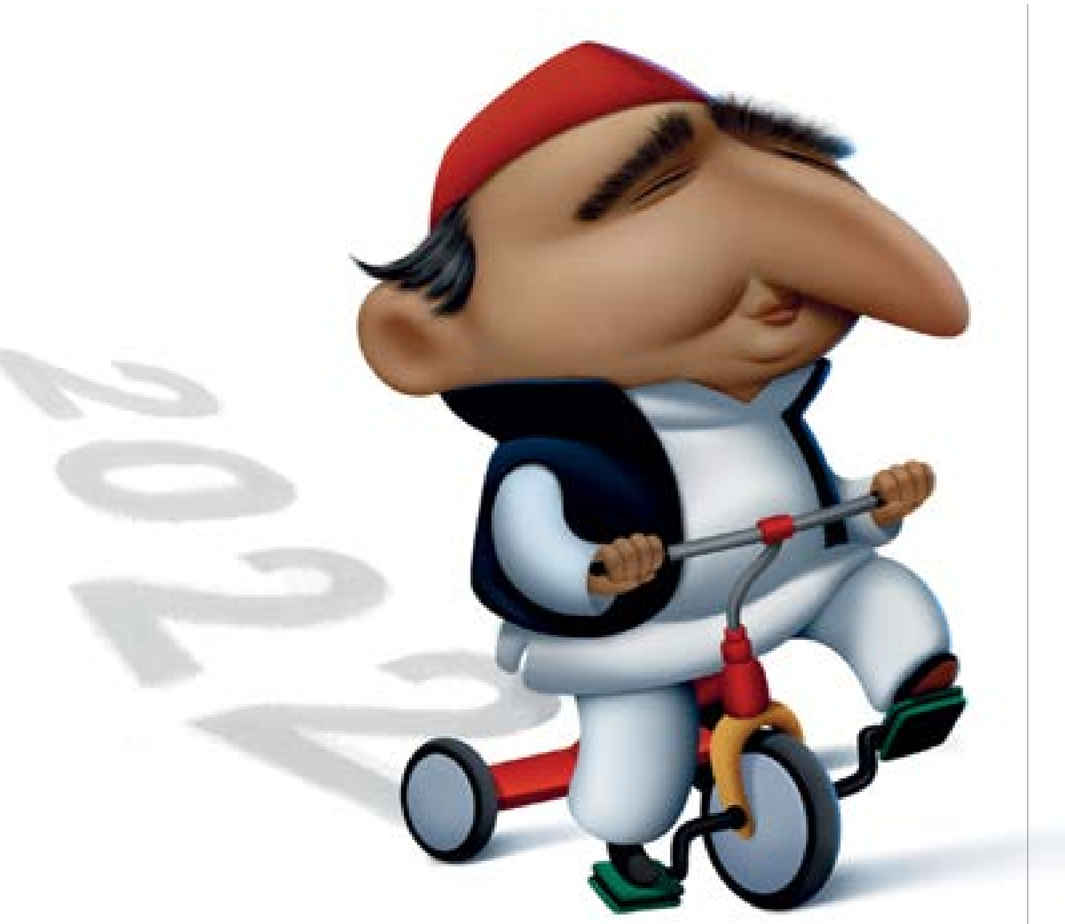
Meanwhile, the BJP-led government in Manipur, on March 26, instructed authorities and the civil society not to offer food and shelter to the Myanmar refugees, except medical attention for those who have suffered 'grievous injuries'. The order had to be withdrawn following a public outcry.

THE REFUGEES HAVE FOUND BIG SUPPORT AMONG MIZOS, WITH VILLAGE COUNCILS READY TO ACCOMMODATE THEM

Independent observers blame the Mizoram-Centre standoff on the lack of a clear policy on international refugees. India is also not a signatory to the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Though India has in the past provided refuge to those fleeing persecution in Sri Lanka, Iran and Tibet, its policy on refugees has been inconsistent. For instance, while Tamils, Tibetans and Afghans have been welcomed, the government considers the Rohingyas from Myanmar a security threat.

While concerns over Rohingyas' alleged involvement in terror activities cannot be ignored, the government's line on them has faced increasing scrutiny after the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in 2019. "What's happening in Myanmar is a classic case of persecution. But India has been dishonest about its foreign policy. The China card is unnecessarily hyped to maintain ties with the military in Myanmar. Also, the CAA is not about protecting people who are being persecuted. It was passed with electoral calculations," says Ravi Nair, executive director, South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre, Delhi.

The central government's insistence on sending the Myanmar refugees back also goes against India's support for non-refoulement, the principle of not sending refugees back home if they are likely to face persecution there. As Neog says, humanitarianism shouldn't require any intellectual justification. ■



GLASSHOUSE

THE STUFF OF LEGEND

Samajwadi Party (SP) national president Akhilesh Yadav, eyeing a return to power in Uttar Pradesh in the 2022 assembly election, is clutching at the urban myth that the Hastinapur assembly seat in Meerut district is the bellwether of government formation. Whichever party wins the seat apparently forms the government. The trend has held since 2002. No wonder Akhilesh recently began his party's 'Mission 2022' programme from Hastinapur. But he now faces a different problem. Several candidate hopefuls in the SP have already begun vying for the prized seat. Akhilesh, it seems, will now have to contend with some more factionalism.

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

Bonding over Beverage

Gujarat chief minister Vijay Rupani's 'Lunch with CM' initiative has him breaking bread once a month with members of various communities. Now, his Goa counterpart, **Pramod Sawant,** has borrowed the idea. 'Coffee with CM' will be Sawant's monthly connect with young people. Wouldn't 'Beer with CM' be more apt, one of his aides wisecracked—it's Goa, after all.

MANDAR DEODHAR

ROAD SHOW

Arunachal Pradesh chief minister **Pema Khandu** has announced a road project to Vijaynagar, one of his state's remotest regions, in style—with a cross-country trek over two days. Khandu, on March 27, became the first CM to reach Arunachal's last administrative headquarters close to the Myanmar border. The road from Vijaynagar to Miao will be ready by March 2022. Khandu drove 157 km by jeep and finished the rest of the journey on foot. He even shared pictures of him walking and driving through mud and slush. An all-terrain politician?

Bolting Horses

NDA constituent **Chirag Paswan** unsuccessfully challenged BJP ally Janata Dal (United) in the Bihar assembly election last November. Since then, things have gone downhill for Chirag and his Lok Janshakti Party (LJP). Its lone MLC in Bihar, Nutan Singh, joined the BJP in February. Now, the lone LJP MLA, Raj Kumar Singh, too appears to have his differences with Chirag. Singh, on March 23, voted for the JD(U) candidate for the post of deputy speaker in the state assembly. The LJP has slapped a showcause notice on Singh, but things aren't looking too bright for Chirag.

–Sandeep Unnithan with Ashish Misra, Kaushik Deka, Kiran D. Tare and Amitabh Srivastava

DELHI VS CENTRE

CAPITAL AND CONTROL

The sharing of executive powers has been a longstanding issue between the governments of Delhi and the Centre. Although it is not a full state, the national capital elects its MLAs, and has hitherto had independent authority in all matters of governance except those relating to land, law and order, and the police—the three domains controlled by the Centre, via Delhi's Lieutenant Governor (LG).

In recent times, given the strained relationship between the AAP (Aam Aadmi Party) government in Delhi and the BJP (BharatiyaJanata Party) at the Centre, the tussle has frequently lapsed into open confrontation, and even landed in the highest court of the land, with AAP alleging that the LG was deliberately stalling the executive decisions of the Delhi government. In July 2018, the Supreme Court decided in favour of the AAP government, ruling that the LG's office did not have the authority to take independent decisions and was bound by the advice of the elected government. The ruling also set clear guidelines for the LG's conduct.

The GNCTD (Amendment) Bill, 2021, passed by both houses of Parliament in late March and ratified by the President, upends this ruling and undermines the executive writ of the elected Delhi government by mandating that the LG must clear all executive decisions of the Delhi state government. Noted lawyer Indira Jaising has said the new law undermines the SC's 2018 judgment and certain provisions of the Constitution—in particular, Article 239 AA.

It bears mention in this context that the BJP has in the past been a vocal advocate of full statehood for Delhi. In fact, as Union home minister, L.K. Advani had introduced the Delhi State Bill in Parliament in 2003. **SHWWETA PUNJ**, deputy editor, INDIA TODAY, spoke to BJP national spokesperson **GOPAL KRISHNA AGARWAL** to understand the Centre's motivations and to **ATISHI MARLENA,** a member of the Political Affairs Committee of AAP, to gauge the state government's response and plan of action. Excerpts:

GOPAL AGARWAL

National Spokesperson, BJP

Q. What was the rationale for this legislation?
The Delhi government [draws its authority] from Article 239 [of the Constitution]. There were some ambiguities [with respect to the powers of the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi and the Delhi government] that were creating difficulties in governance. Because there were two authorities governing Delhi and because of the AAP's style of functioning, the two were constantly at loggerheads. [The legislation] clearly demarcates what powers are given to the Delhi government. There were many issues, such as the appointment of administrative officers and bureaucrats, in which this [dual system] was creating problems.

Q. What are the consequences of this legislation?
There should be a coordinated and smooth functioning of the Delhi government, which was not happening. Delhi has a special status with the central government—there are issues where the Centre needs more [authority]. If there is no clarity [on lines of authority], it can complicate certain situations. For instance, on the 26th of January, Arvind Kejriwal said he will sit on a *dharna*. An elected government has to function within the constitutional domain—it is not the supreme power in democracy. We have a federal structure where power is distributed, and these powers have to be clearly defined

Photographs by GETTY IMAGES

and distributed. [Even] the LG's power is not supreme—he needs the consent of the President. The law clarifies 66 amendments in Article 239, which establishes clarity.

Q. The AAP says this is an attempt to take control of the capital by other means because the BJP has been unable to win an election here.
That's all political rhetoric. The argument that one party is more pro-governance than the other doesn't stand. The Chief Minister of Delhi threatened to go on *dharna* on the 26th of January—the AAP sat on a *dharna* at the LG's house. They have a certain way of functioning, which [does not befit the office of] a chief minister. Parliament is supreme. Anybody has the right to go to the Supreme Court. But once a law is enacted, it becomes the law of the land and is not so easy to challenge. ■

ATISHI MARLENA

Member, Political Affairs Committee, AAP

Q. How would you describe the rationale for this legislation?
In the Delhi [elections], the BJP hasn't been able to move beyond single digits. There is an extremely popular government that is in power here. The BJP has not been able to beat the AAP in an electoral battle, [so they have passed this law] to wrest power.

Q. What is the consequence of this legislation?
The fact is that the bill is unconstitutional. The fact that the Delhi government draws its authority from Article 239 of the Constitution has been a subject of much controversy. The matter [was referred] to a five-member constitutional bench [which] ruled that apart from land, law & order and police, all other powers lie with the elected government of Delhi. The SC has clarified these matters. There are only three reserve subjects—land, law & order and police. The only power the LG has [on non-reserve subjects] is to refer the decisions to the President. This is what the constitutional bench of the SC said. The government's bill goes against the judgment of the constitutional bench and says that every executive decision of the Delhi government has to be ratified by the LG. The Parliament does not have the power to change the constitutional mandate given to the elected government of Delhi.

Now, the Delhi government will not have power over anything—the LG can stall everything. [Because of this problem], there were two or three years when governance had come to a standstill. [Take the issue of] CCTV cameras. Three years ago, 20 of our MLAs went and sat at the LG's office, because the decision [on putting up CCTV cameras in Delhi] had been lying with the LG for months. On doorstep delivery of services, we passed a decision [to implement it] and the LG returned it saying 'I don't think doorstep delivery is a good idea, it will increase traffic and pollution'. The Delhi government has lost its power.

Q. What do you plan to do now?
Now we will take this issue up on the streets of Delhi, in the court of law, on all possible forums. This is an attack on the democratic and federal character of the country. ■

RIVER LINKING

THE KEN-BETWA BATTLEGROUND

By Rahul Noronha

On March 22, World Water Day, the Centre inked a tripartite agreement with the governments of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh to push forward work on the Ken-Betwa River Link (KBRL) project. Among other infrastructure, this entails the construction of a 2-km-long dam on the Ken river at Daudhan village in Madhya Pradesh's Chhatarpur district. The water from the created reservoir will then be transferred via canal to the Betwa river basin in Uttar Pradesh.

The project was originally conceived in 1980, under what was then the Centre's National Perspective Plan to transfer water from surplus regions to deficit areas via river-linking projects. To be built at a cost of about Rs 35,111 crore, it is expected to provide irrigation and drinking water to 13 districts across Madhya Pradesh (Raisen, Vidisha, Sagar, Panna, Chhatarpur, Shivpuri, Tikamgarh, Datia and Damoh) and Uttar Pradesh (Jhansi, Mahoba, Lalitpur and Banda). The Centre will bear 90 per cent of the cost, with the states putting up the rest. According to the Jal Shakti ministry, the project will supply irrigation to 1.06 million hectares, drinking water to 6.2 million people and 103 MW of hydroelectric power. However, it will also cause extensive environmental damage. According to a reply in Parliament by minister of state Rattan Lal Kataria, it will submerge 6,017 hectares of forests, of which 4,206 hectares lie within the Panna Tiger Reserve.

The agreement signed on March 22 seems to turn the page on some of the problems that have dogged this project since it began, such as disagreements between Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh on water-sharing. However, environmental concerns and decades-old protests on those grounds seem to have been ignored. Activists say the battle is far from over, pointing out that major clearances are yet to be granted.

In terms of implementation, a big

WATER MANAGEMENT
Gangau Dam at Khajuraho, downstream from the proposed Daudhan dam for the Ken-Betwa River Linking project

PANKAJ TIWARI

step was taken in 2005, when a water-sharing agreement was signed by the governments of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. In 2017, the project hit a roadblock, with Madhya Pradesh demanding that this agreement be revisited. In 2019, after the formation of the Jal Shakti ministry, there was a renewed push, with Jal Shakti minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat stepping in to break the deadlock. A major sticking point was Uttar Pradesh's demand for 935 MCM (million cubic metres) of water during the lean water season, with Madhya Pradesh insisting it would only be willing to release 550 MCM of the projected 1,800 MCM expected to be available at that time of the year. A deal struck in January envisages Madhya Pradesh getting 1,050 MCM and Uttar Pradesh 750 MCM in this season.

When it comes to environmental consequences, two major issues remain unresolved. One relates to Stage I forest clearances already granted by the ministry of environment, forest and climate change. "These clearances were conditional, given on the grounds that there will be no power project inside Panna Tiger Reserve," explains Himanshu Thakkar, coordinator of the South Asian Network on Dams, Rivers and People. "But on March 22, the Union ministry said that a power project is part of the KBRL project, without saying whether it has been shifted outside the Panna Tiger Reserve. Secondly, clearance was given subject to land being made available for compensatory afforestation, a reassessment of the number of trees that would be lost and a cost-benefit analysis." Thakkar says Stage II forest clearances cannot be granted till these conditions are met. The Stage I clearances have also been challenged in the National Green Tribunal.

COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

6.2 mn

people will gain access to drinking water and 1.06 mn ha will be irrigated, according to the Jal Shakti ministry

6,017

hectares of forests will be submerged, including 4,206 hectares inside the Panna Tiger reserve

₹35,111 cr

The total cost of the KBRL project. The Centre will pay 90 per cent of the cost, with Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh paying the balance

On the Stage II forest clearances, the Supreme Court, while hearing a petition challenging the project, had asked the Central Empowered Committee (CEC), a body of experts under the apex court, to give its opinion on the matter. In August 2019, the CEC's report said that alternative, lower-cost projects had not been considered, and that granting clearances to a hydro-electric project within a tiger reserve violated the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. It also noted that about 42 sq. km of the reserve's 542 sq. km core area would be lost as a result, preventing the movement of wildlife through the area. Commenting on a proposal by the NTCA (National Tiger Conservation Authority) to set up a 'conservation complex' between the Rani Durgawati and Nauradehi sanctuaries in Madhya Pradesh and the Ranipur sanctuary in Uttar Pradesh to offset the land loss, the CEC report noted that wildlife was unlikely to be able to freely move to this area because of the presence of large human habitations. "The [KBRL] project does not have all the necessary clearances and cannot proceed," says Ritwik Dutta, an advocate representing petitioner Manoj Mishra, based on whose complaint the Supreme Court had sought a report from the CEC. "We will move the court for [another] hearing if project implementation begins."

On March 22, Jairam Ramesh, former minister for environment and forests, took to Twitter to speak against the project, writing that it would 'all but destroy the Panna Tiger Reserve in MP, a success story in translocation and revival'. On the other hand, Madhya Pradesh chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has described the project as a panacea for the water-shortage issues faced by the Bundelkhand region, saying the project will "help 4.1 million people get access to drinking water". ■

RAJASTHAN PHONE-TAPPING ROW

Trial by FIRe

By Rohit Parihar

EYEBALL TO EYEBALL
Union minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat; Rajasthan CM Ashok Gehlot

Union Jal Shakti minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat has upped the ante in the phone-tapping row surrounding an alleged plot last year to pull down the Ashok Gehlot-led Congress government in Rajasthan. The 53-year-old BJP leader lodged a complaint in New Delhi on March 25, alleging that his phone was illegally tapped in July 2020 and the conversations leaked to the media. The Delhi police registered an FIR on the basis of the complaint.

Gehlot had cited the recorded conversations to allege that Shekhawat was the main conspirator in the failed attempt to topple his government in connivance with Sachin Pilot, then deputy chief minister of Rajasthan and state Congress chief.

In his complaint, Shekhawat alleged that the illegal phone tap was a violation of Section 26 of the Indian Telegraph Act. But the FIR adds charges under other provisions of the law—Section 72 of the Information Technology Act (breach of confidentiality and privacy), Section 409 of the Indian Penal Code or IPC (criminal breach of trust by a public servant entrusted with property) and Section 120B of IPC (criminal conspiracy). The main accused in the FIR is Lokesh Sharma, officer on special duty to assist the Rajasthan chief minister, who has admitted sending one clip from the tapes that he received on social media to mediapersons, and which Mahesh Joshi, chief whip of the Congress legislature party in Rajasthan, used to get the Special Operations Group (SOG) of the state police to lodge a case of sedition against Shekhawat and others. The sedition case was subsequently closed and the FIR transferred to Rajasthan's Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB).

Shekhawat's move signals a BJP plan to corner Gehlot on the phone-tapping issue after the ongoing assembly elections in several states. But it is a gamble, trying as it does to segregate the issue of whether the tapping was legal from the drift of the conversations recorded, which point to horse-trading of MLAs. The FIR indicates that Shekhawat's phone was tapped and conversations about toppling Gehlot—currently being investigated by the ACB—did take place. This contradicts Shekhawat's earlier stand that the voice in the tapes had a different accent from his, as also a plea in a Jaipur court last year by BJP state spokesperson Laxmikant Bhardwaj that an FIR be registered against Sharma and others for allegedly using fake audio to tarnish the image of BJP leaders.

BJP insiders say the party's next strategy could be to get the courts to transfer all the phone tap-related cases to the CBI. About Shekhawat's FIR, Jaipur-based lawyer Ajay Jain says: "Shekhawat had not mentioned [in the complaint] that the tapping was done in Delhi. How then could he lodge a case there? Shekhawat's refusal at first to cooperate with Rajasthan's investigative agencies and the inordinate delay in lodging the FIR suggest a political motive [in the entire affair]."

Rajasthan BJP chief Satish Poonia defends the FIR, saying: "We effectively raised the phone-tapping issue in the assembly. It forced the Gehlot government to admit that phones were tapped and the chief minister's OSD was involved. This must have given Shekhawat a strong reason to go for the FIR."

Shekhawat said on March 28 that he had filed the complaint to ascertain if, and how, the phones had been tapped. His move also appears to be aimed at getting the

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

PURUSHOTTAM DIWAKAR

BJP INSIDERS SAY THE PARTY'S NEXT STRATEGY COULD BE TO GET THE COURTS TO TRANSFER ALL THE PHONE TAP-RELATED CASES TO THE CBI

investigative agencies to interrogate OSD Sharma in order to trace the source of the leaked tapes. "If the phone-tapping was done legally, how did it reach the chief minister's office and how did his OSD access it and make it go viral?" asks Shekhawat. He claims that some officers have told him that at least some of the phone taps were illegal.

Shekhawat's political rise has been rather quick and he is seen as eager to position himself as Gehlot's main rival in Rajasthan. Son of a state public health department engineer, Shekhawat was, in 1992, elected as students' union president at the Jodhpur-based Jai Narain Vyas University. He had contested on an ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad) ticket. He moved to Ethiopia for his farming business but maintained his association with affiliate organisations of the Sangh Parivar, which got him the BJP ticket from Jodhpur in the 2014 Lok Sabha election. Shekhawat defeated Chandresh Kumari Katoch, the sitting MP and sister of the erstwhile maharaja of Jodhpur, Gaj Singh.

Shekhawat's knowledge of technological advances in farming impressed Prime Minister Narendra Modi and he was appointed MoS agriculture in 2017. Modi also banked on Shekhawat for feedback on grassroots issues in Rajasthan. Shekhawat retained the Jodhpur seat in the 2019 general election by defeating Gehlot's son Vaibhav and was elevated to cabinet minister for the newly formed Jal Shakti ministry. In 2018, Modi and then BJP chief Amit Shah had pushed Shekhawat's name for Rajasthan BJP chief, but it was successfully opposed by then chief minister Vasundhara Raje, a move that ironically elevated him to the stature of a potential chief ministerial candidate.

While the FIR could give Gehlot a reason to worry, Shekhawat too will face the heat should the chief minister get the SOG to speed up investigation into the alleged embezzlement of about Rs 900 crore of investors' money by the Sanjeevani Credit Cooperative Society, based primarily in Jodhpur and a few other cities in Rajasthan and the neighbouring states. Shekhawat's alleged role in the case is under scrutiny. The ongoing probe has revealed that the society purchased for Rs 100 crore—at hundred times the value—shares that Shekhawat and his wife allegedly owned in one Navprabha Buildtech, which had assets worth Rs 4.5 crore and a debt of Rs 10 crore.

While the SOG has not yet named Shekhawat as an accused in its two charge-sheets, the agency has little expertise to investigate illegalities and money laundering in such transactions. Advocate Jain claims it is a case of converting black money into white by defrauding investors of the cooperative society. Shekhawat refutes the charges and says no family member of his has ever been a member of the society and that the money he received was from the sale of his Navprabha shares to the society.

It's hard to predict who will blink first in the Shekhawat-Gehlot phone-tap face-off. Will the two continue to target each other aggressively or will they ultimately enter a truce by closing the cases against each other? After all, there are no permanent enemies in politics. One leader almost certainly pleased with these developments is Pilot, hoping that the BJP heat on Gehlot will tilt the scales in his favour, making him more agreeable to the Congress high command and aiding his reinstatement in the state government or party executive, positions he lost after the failed coup last year. ■

BIHAR

INAUSPICIOUS START

By Amitabh Srivastava

When the BJP won 74 of the 110 seats it contested in the November 2020 election for the 243-member Bihar assembly, just one less than the Rashtriya Janata Dal's 75 (of 144 contested) and well ahead of alliance partner Janata Dal (United)'s 43 (of 115 seats), it achieved two things: become the principal opposition to the RJD in Bihar, and the dominant partner in the National Democratic Alliance.

In view of the verdict, JD(U) chief Nitish Kumar refused to stake claim to the chief minister's post, offering it instead to the BJP. The saffron leadership, however, persuaded him to continue as chief minister as it set about the task of consolidating its gains.

Among the first things the party did was to replace in one stroke its entire top leadership with new and untested leaders. Sushil Kumar Modi, the deputy chief minister in the previous government, was shunted to the Rajya Sabha. Two of the other seniormost leaders—Nand Kishore Yadav and Prem Kumar—who have been elected to the House for the seventh and eighth time respectively, were made chairmen of assembly committees, effectively ending their prospects of joining the Nitish cabinet. Kumar, incidentally, was for long the BJP's most visible EBC (Extremely Backward Class) face, and was one of the few undeclared chief ministerial faces when the party unsuccessfully contested the 2015 assembly poll.

What explains the BJP's move? In the beginning, it seemed like just an attempt by the party to shed its secular face and follow a more hardline stance. Over the years, both Yadav and Kumar had come to represent the more moderate face of the BJP in Bihar. However, a section of the party leadership believes they may have been jettisoned due to their good relations with Nitish. "Perhaps the leadership wants to promote one-track leaders, not those who would not consider hurting an alliance partner," says a BJP leader.

The saffron game plan is clear: to be *aatmanirbhar* in Bihar. Accordingly, Tarkishore Prasad, from the OBC Bania caste of Kalwars, has replaced Sushil Modi as deputy chief minister. Renu Devi, who represents the influential Nonia EBC caste, has also been made deputy chief minister. Vijay Kumar Sinha, an upper caste Bhumihar Brahmin who was appointed Speaker, forms the third important axis. Together, the three represent 18-20 per cent of the identity vote. Several other rookie politicians have been made ministers on the basis of the caste they represent.

WITH THEIR CASTE MIX, THE NEW BJP LEADERS IN BIHAR WERE EXPECTED TO FUEL ITS EXPANSION. ALL THEY HAVE DONE SO FAR IS THROW THEIR WEIGHT AROUND

By appointing this new set of leaders, the party hopes to broaden its base and carve a saffron future in the state. Of course, it may be easier said than done as Bihar has only elected socialist governments since 1990 and the new BJP lieutenants not only seem to be struggling, but alarmingly, also working against each other.

On March 15, for instance, when Tejashwi Yadav told sugarcane minister Pramod Kumar, "*Kaise mantri aapko bana diya, jawab aata nahin hai*!", Tarkishore Prasad took issue not just with the RJD leader but also accused his partyman and Speaker Sinha of protecting the leader of the opposition. Prasad's belligerence was in sharp contrast to the

SONU KISHAN

LET THERE BE LIGHT
Bihar Dy CM Tarkishore Prasad, BJP state president Sanjay Jaiswal, BJP MP Sushil Modi et al at a function in Patna, Mar. 5

reason and calm that his predecessor, Sushil Modi, displayed.

Sinha was at the receiving end of another partyman's attack on March 17, when Bihar's panchayati raj minister Samrat Choudhary told him not to get agitated, "*Bahut vyakul nahin hona hai*." Samrat's response came during question hour in the assembly when Sinha admonished him for his department's failure to submit online answers to questions in the assembly. A visibly upset Sinha asked Samrat to withdraw the word, but not only did he repeat it, Samrat also told Sinha, "*Iss tarah nahin chalega*. This is not how it is done. You cannot give such directions."

Son of former minister Shakuni Choudhary, who was a minister in the Rabri Devi cabinet, Samrat is seen as an emerging Koeri leader, crucial to the BJP project to win over the Kushwahas, who make up 6 per cent of Bihar's electorate and have traditionally supported Nitish.

Samrat apologised when the session resumed later in the day, but the damage had already been done. Shortly before his apology, senior JD(U) leader and parliamentary affairs minister Vijay Kumar Choudhary said Samrat's words had harmed the dignity of the Speaker's office. Some allege Samrat had been instigated by another powerful BJP leader.

Another BJP leader, revenue and land reform minister Ram Surat Rai, has left the party uncomfortable. In November 2020, in contravention of the prohibition that Nitish had imposed in his previous government, the police seized liquor from a school that was running on land that Rai's brother owned in Muzaffarpur. Though Rai maintained he had separated from his brother and that the school was leased out to someone who has already been arrested, the controversy has refused to die down. Rai, a Yadav leader, promised to resign and give up politics if his complicity was established, but his parting shot to Tejashwi, "*Gandhi maidan mein fariya lenge* (We'll settle the issue in Gandhi maidan)," did not do the party any favours.

"The BJP seems to have completely mismanaged its strategy in Bihar and squandered the opportunity that the Bihar verdict offered," says Dr Nawal Kishore Choudhary, retired head of the economics department at Patna University. "The party's horses-for-courses approach seems oversimplistic. I don't see potential in any of these leaders. Choosing people simply on the basis of caste and because they might have won some previous election does not seem that great a strategy."

"The BJP took a huge risk by replacing Sushil Modi," says Professor Raghunandan Sharma, former head of the sociology department at Patna University. "He was a man of governance and competent as deputy chief minister. But Modi was also seen as being too close to Nitish and therefore not the right person to lead the party's expansion plans in Bihar. Unfortunately, the new party leaders like Tarkishore Prasad look uninspiring."

Dr Choudhary agrees. "New deputy CM Tarkishore Prasad and revenue and land reforms minister Ram Surat Rai may have the lung power, but they still have to prove themselves as men of governance." With the new saffron leadership looking less promising and more of a stopgap arrangement, the academic feels that the party may have to push old horses like Nityanand Rai to consolidate the saffron constituency in Bihar. A Shah favourite, Rai was state BJP president when the BJP won all 17 Lok Sabha seats it contested in 2019. A prominent Yadav leader, his main challenge is that his community brethren have chosen to repose their faith in Tejashwi as their leader. ■

MAKING THE BJP FUTURE-READY

The current assembly elections will be a turning point for the party. If it wins in Bengal, nothing will stop its return in 2024. But if it loses, it could trigger a domino effect and jeopardise its reforms agenda

BY RAJ CHENGAPPA & ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

Photo illustration by NILANJAN DAS

Original photograph by CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

WHEN HE WAS YOUNG, Jagat Prakash Nadda was an ace sprinter and swimmer, winning gold medals both in school and college in Patna where he grew up. Sports, he said, taught him focus, consistency and the patience to wait for the right opportunity. These qualities held him in good stead when he returned to his home state, Himachal Pradesh, joined politics and was elected an MLA of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In 1998, when the party won the assembly poll, he was bypassed for the chief minister's post which was given to Prem Kumar Dhumal. The BJP general secretary who made that choice was Narendra Modi. Even though Nadda had worked closely with Modi to ensure the BJP win, he showed no rancour and even joined the Dhumal cabinet. Modi was apparently impressed by Nadda's positivity and maturity.

Twenty years later, Modi would reward Nadda for his patience and equanimity when the Himachal leader would formally succeed Amit Shah as the BJP president in January 2020. By then, Modi and Shah had built the BJP into the world's largest political party with over 150 million members. The two leaders had spearheaded the party's astounding back-to-back parliamentary majorities in the 2014 and 2019 general elections. Not just that, the BJP had by 2018 formed, or was part of, governments in 21 states, which accounted for 70 per cent of the country's population. This included winning a brute majority in Uttar Pradesh, where it returned to power after a hiatus of 15 years.

Nadda is now the CEO of a colossal political organisation which, in a short span of time, has shaken off the image of "Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan". The BJP has emerged as the fulcrum of Indian politics. It is now becoming a pan-Indian party that dominates the national political narrative as only the Congress was able to do in the past. Apart from building the BJP into an electoral juggernaut, Shah, as its president, also envisaged a two-pronged role for the party: be a dynamic bridge between the government and the people and use that feedback to provide the government with context and direction for governance. Many saw Nadda as a rubber stamp for Modi and Shah, who would allow them to retain control of the party and be, as one critic put it, nothing more than an "HMV (His Master's Voice)". Others, however, believe Nadda was chosen to provide the perfect balance and synergy to ensure the stability and continuity of the party's growth.

The foremost challenge before Nadda is to fill the very large shoes of Amit Shah. Not only does he have to consolidate the vast political empire Modi and Shah have built but also expand the party's presence in states to the east and south. The current round of assembly polls will be a litmus test for him and the party. Nadda also has to ensure that the party's cadre provide grassroots support for the economic reforms that Prime Minister Modi has launched in the past year so that they are not stymied by protests as the new farm laws have been. Nadda is not fazed by the enormity of his tasks, crediting his sports background for his ability to remain calm in the middle of a storm. In an in-depth interview (see *'The BJP's strength is its cohesion'*), he said, "When we work with team spirit, the results are good. There is continuity and effectiveness and no confusion among the cadre. There are areas where we have an opportunity to expand, so we are putting in resources to strengthen the party's cadre and structure apart from revitalising our existing base."

Yet, despite the big wins in the general elections, the BJP's performance in the state assembly elections in the past three years has been distinctly patchy and a growing cause for worry for its leaders. In 2018, it was ousted from power in Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. In the round of state polls after the 2019 general election, it lost power in Jharkhand, was thwarted in Maharashtra, got thrashed in Delhi and had to settle for a coalition in Haryana. The only saving grace was its win in Bihar where the BJP won more seats than its coalition partner, the Janata Dal (United), but not before the upstart scion of the Rashtriya Janata Dal, Tejashwi Yadav, gave them a fright and almost snatched victory from them. Given its shaky performance in recent state polls, the big questions being asked are: Has the party's electoral performance peaked and is it now on the decline? Despite Modi's iconic status, is his ability to pull votes for the BJP in state polls dwindling?

It is for these reasons that the BJP is pulling out all the stops to do well in the ongoing assembly polls, particularly in West Bengal. The large eastern state is witnessing a fierce contest because, for the first time in three decades, a national ruling party is posing a stiff challenge to the decade-long reign of the Trinamool Congress (TMC), the regional ruling party headed by Mamata Banerjee. Shah pulled off the feat in the 2019 parliamentary election when the BJP for the first time won 18 of the 42 seats in Bengal, sending Mamata into complete shock.

Now, Modi and Shah have put their reputation on the line to oust Mamata from power and instal the first-ever BJP government in Bengal. Modi is addressing as many as 20 rallies and Shah twice the number. The party has roped in 109 national leaders to campaign in the state, including Union ministers Dharmendra Pradhan, Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, Smriti Irani and Girijaj Singh. Union minister of state Babul Supriyo has been fielded as a candidate as have Lok Sabha MPs Locket Chatterjee and Nishit Pramanik, apart from Rajya Sabha MP Swapan Dasgupta.

The stakes are incredibly high. Poll strategist Prashant Kishor, who is guiding the TMC campaign, goes to the extent of saying that were the BJP to win in Bengal, one-nation, one party will become a distinct possibility in the country. He may be overstating the case to frighten the opposition out of its complacency, but if Bengal does fall to the BJP, it is likely to have a multiplier effect in the next round of state elections in 2022, particularly the crucial battle for UP. However, the BJP has its eyes set on the big prize: returning to power for the third consecutive time at the Centre in 2024, a task that would become easier if the BJP won most of the big assembly polls before the general election. “West Bengal can give BJP the much-required electoral legitimacy but, if it loses, it will have a serious bearing on the outcome of the UP polls next year,” says Abhay Kumar Dubey, professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in Delhi. The results will also indicate whether the farmers’ agitation has dented its popularity; a win will encourage it to push through more such reforms. Nadda, however, attributes the BJP’s unbridled aggression to win polls not to electoral insecurity but to something larger than that. “If India has to make rapid progress,” he says, “and we have a dynamic leader in Narendra Modi*ji*, why should the BJP waste time? We have to take advantage and make sure we can bring change and empower people at the grassroots level.”

THE TRINITY
WHILE MODI AND SHAH ARE STRATEGISTS PAR EXCELLENCE, NADDA'S JOB IS TO ENSURE THE EFFECTIVE EXECUTION OF STRATEGIES AND PLANS

YET, WHICHEVER WAY the verdicts go in the current round of assembly elections, the BJP needs to introspect on several issues. Among them is the growing perception that it has become an opportunistic party that is willing to gain power at any cost. Engineering defections has become part of its strategy to destroy the opposition and capture power in the states. In West Bengal, one has lost count of the number of TMC MLAs and leaders it has won over to its side. In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP toppled the Kamal Nath-led Congress government by getting a sizeable section of the MLAs to defect overnight. It did the same in Goa and Karnataka earlier. In Rajasthan, the party’s attempt to dislodge the Congress government failed. In Maharashtra, the BJP got its comeuppance when its ally, Shiv Sena, joined forces with its opponents to form the government. All this has led critics to dub the BJP as the new Congress.

Nadda refutes the charge hotly in his interview. He points out the difference between ethical and non-ethical means of engineering defections and denies allegations that MLAs and leaders are being bought and sold. The party, he argues, has never compromised on its principles or ideology and is now large enough to accommodate those unhappy in their own parties. The BJP president is on stronger ground when he talks of how he is strengthening the booth management system Shah had perfected. Nadda has gone a step ahead and formed what are known as *panna samitis* (page committees) to interact with voters listed on every page of the electoral roll and woo them. He is also employing technology, including extensive data analysis, to guide the party’s election strategy, along with training cadre and enrolling block-level leaders to brief voters on the party’s achievements. These are the kind of steps that can bring the party rich dividends in polls rather than defectors from other parties.

While the BJP is using nationalism, identity and development to garner support, resorting to extreme polarisation of voters, as it is doing in Bengal, is fraught with risks. It may bring electoral gains, but at a heavy cost. The BJP already has a trump card in the Modi government’s development agenda, particularly its impressive record in providing toilets, drinking water, housing, cooking gas and roads to the poor. It is among the major reasons why Modi was re-elected in 2019 and could see the party do well even in the upcoming assembly polls. Ramming through the divisive Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), on the other hand, is being seen as nothing but an electoral ploy, with the BJP itself exhibiting ambiguity on its implementation in Assam and West Bengal. The BJP was also left red-faced when the AIADMK, its electoral ally in Tamil Nadu, during the campaign said it will not implement CAA if it returned to power. If the BJP loses in these states, then the fate of CAA is sealed. “The results will determine the direction of minority politics in India. We are all looking forward to it,” says CSDS’s Dubey.

The other problem for the BJP is its growing overdependence on Modi to win assembly elections. Of course, a whole set of new leaders, including Devendra Fadnavis in Maharashtra and M.L. Khattar in Haryana, have been propelled to prominent positions riding on Modi's coat-tails. However, the lack of strong local leadership in West Bengal is something the party will have to introspect on and provide answers for. Kailash Vijayvargiya, the BJP's general secretary in-charge of the state, says, "Announcing a CM candidate is not required. The party has been able to take up issues as well as build a discourse without any face." Yet, the explanation does little to counter Mamata's charge that if the BJP comes to power, the state will be "ruled by outsiders".

ONE OF NADDA'S major tasks is to execute Operation Kamalam, the plan to build its cadre in the five southern states where it lacks a presence: Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry. Combined, these states send 102 MPs to the Lok Sabha and the BJP's current tally is just four. Wins in these states would also boost the BJP's Rajya Sabha numbers, which currently stand at 95 (it needs 123 for a simple majority), forcing it to seek help from allies and like-minded parties to push through crucial bills. So, in Tamil Nadu, it is piggybacking on the AIADMK but while agreeing to contest only 20 seats in the assembly poll, it will try and force its ally to concede the maximum number of the 39 Lok Sabha seats the state has in the 2024 general election.

In Kerala, where the BJP won only one seat in the previous assembly poll, it is now contesting 115 seats, leaving just 25 for its allies. Along with its Hindu consolidation campaign, the BJP is also wooing the Christians and sections of the Muslims in the state. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has even set up an affiliate, the Rashtriya Christian Manch, along with a reoriented Muslim Manch, to focus on its new supporters. The BJP and its NDA constituents have set up committees in 30,450 of the 34,780 polling booths across the state. This reorganisation will hone the BJP's electoral war machine for the future. The party hopes it will gain more strength to contest the state's 20 Lok Sabha seats.

> **THE BIG QUESTIONS**
> **WITH BJP INCREASINGLY DEPENDENT ON MODI'S VOTE-GETTING ABILITIES, CAN IT WIN WITHOUT HIM? AND AFTER MODI, WHO?**

With Modi attaining iconic status, akin to Indira Gandhi, and with the party's fortunes increasingly dependent on his vote-getting abilities, the questions being asked are: After Modi, who? Can the BJP win elections without him? Even Shah, despite his growing prominence, is nowhere close to Modi in the popularity stakes. A win in Bengal will establish Shah's position as number two. As Nadda says, "At this point of time, Modi*ji* is strong enough. He is in full command and he will continue for long. For us, it is an opportunity to best utilise this and work under his leadership." Yet, the imperative remains. The BJP must develop a strong second and third line of leaders both at the Centre and in states to lead the party in the not so distant future. That paucity of leadership is the reason why many ministers hold more than two portfolios, with Narendra Tomar in charge of four ministries. This holds up the PM's development agenda—because he cannot find the competent leadership to execute all his programmes, the prime minister's office is forced to oversee many of them.

The RSS, the BJP's ideological mentor, is in principle against the development of cult figures, but has so far looked benignly at Modi's dominance. That's because the Modi government has implemented the key items on its agenda, including the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir and the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. Consequently, there is far greater coordination and less friction between the BJP and RSS on governance issues. The prime minister was able to push through major economic reforms, including privatisation of PSUs and the opening of key sectors to FDI, despite key RSS affiliates voicing concern. By calling the initiative Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan (Self-Reliance Campaign), Modi signalled it was aligned with the Sangh agenda, so that it would not derail the reform process. Meanwhile, Nadda, to enable greater synergy with the RSS, has been integrating RSS *pracharak*s into party organisations. Thus, for the first time, the BJP has elevated three *pracharak*s—V. Satish, Sudan Singh and Shiv Prakash—from joint general secretaries (organisation) to vice presidents and given them special assignments. Shiv Prakash, for instance, has been made in-charge of the crucial state of West Bengal, apart from Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

The BJP is currently working with several advantages that could see it retain power for a long time. Its strength, as one leader put it, is: "We have cadre, leader and Parivar." It has money power too. Fortunately for the party, the opposition also remains in disarray and has failed to effectively challenge the BJP on key issues. The equation could change if the BJP doesn't win in Bengal and also loses in Assam. Meanwhile, the Modi-Shah-Nadda trinity presides over the ever-expanding BJP. While Shah is a proponent of hardline Hindutva, Modi opts for a more nuanced approach. Both, however, are strategists par excellence. Nadda's job, meanwhile, is to ensure the effective execution of strategies and plans and oversee the running of the party. Compared to the disciplinarian and aggressive go-getter that Shah is, Nadda is more approachable and non-confrontational. The BJP president provides, as an insider says aptly, "continuity, calibration and contextualisation" to party and governance issues. Nadda himself says, "Frankly, I have never felt alone in the job." With 150 million supporters, can it be any other way? ■

'THE BJP'S STRENGTH IS ITS COHESION'

At the helm of India's dominant political party, BJP national president **JAGAT PRAKASH NADDA**, *in an exclusive interview with Group Editorial Director (Publishing)* **Raj Chengappa** *and Senior Editor* **Anilesh S. Mahajan**, *reveals what makes the organisation the powerhouse it is today and how it prepares for future challenges. Excerpts*

Q. You played sports when you were young. Does that background help you now in taking decisions and running a political party?
A. Yes. I was a running champion and won both sprint and long-distance events. I was also a swimmer and was Bihar No. 4. I even swam across the Ganga in Patna six times. In both politics and sports, it is necessary to focus and be consistent. You also have to wait for opportunities, so you need to be patient.

Q. When you took over as BJP president from Amit Shah, the party had already won two back-to-back general elections along with several major assembly polls. What priorities did you set out for yourself when you assumed charge?
A. My thinking process is a little different. I believe I should give my best to whatever is given to me. I am a very content person and believe in my own ability to deliver. Generally, people think they will do this, this and this if they come into a certain position. I believe in continuity of things. So, after taking stock and strengthening the existing structure, you scale

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

THE NADDA CREDO

"IF WE WANT INDIA TO BE PROGRESSIVE AND HAVE A DYNAMIC LEADER LIKE MODI*JI*, WHY SHOULD WE WASTE THE OPPORTUNITY? WE WILL FIGHT EVERY ELECTION AGGRESSIVELY AND TO WIN"

up. I never thought I had become president because there was a need for change. Amit Shah had put in five long years of effort, which yielded results. My responsibility was to push things forward in the same manner. We became the world's largest political party under his presidentship. My responsibility was to connect with the new members and turn supporters into workers. I was not starting a new project, only taking it forward. That was my priority. He (Shah) brought the booth system to the page (of the voters' list). I am trying to see the page gets converted into a committee.

Q. What does page getting converted to a committee mean?

A. It means each page should have a committee (which can canvass among those voters). That way, while we are going forward, I am strengthening the structure he has put in place—that is the continuity part. In the same way, the issues he had raised in different states had to be further strengthened, which we did. Amit*ji* had experimented in Bengal for the past three to four years, and those experiments had shown results. Why should I have started my own experiments? So, we further strengthened [what we had]. When we work with team spirit, the results are good, there is continuity and effectiveness, and no confusion among the cadre. Our party has always run on a particular *sanskar* and *sanskriti* (tradition and culture).

> **BJP WORK ETHIC**
> **"WHEN WE WORK WITH TEAM SPIRIT, THE RESULTS ARE GOOD, THERE IS CONTINUITY AND EFFECTIVENESS, AND NO CONFUSION AMONG THE CADRE. OUR PARTY HAS ALWAYS RUN ON A PARTICULAR *SANSKAR* AND *SANSKRITI* (TRADITION AND CULTURE)"**

Q. Continuity apart, what are your other areas of focus?

A. The agenda has been set by Amit Shah*ji* himself, [he has laid down] the areas we have to work in: West Bengal, Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala. These are the states that present an opportunity for expansion, so we need to strengthen our organisation here and at the same time revitalise and strengthen ourselves [in places] where we already have a presence. This is part of our comprehensive planning. Secondly, our party has grown manifold, so our support system also needs to improve, as does the quality of research on last-man delivery, the role of a political party beyond politics and how comprehensively we can shape the country's polity. We're working on all these aspects.

Q. How have technology and data analysis changed your party? Does it give you an edge over other parties in the electoral arena?

A. As far as the information and research part is concerned, technology is a very effective tool and helps a lot. But when it comes to delivery, ultimately it is the human factor. You cannot substitute the human element with a technological one. For, it is the people who do the work, and their fighting spirit, which is the essence. For example, the Congress too does a lot of research, but it has nobody to implement it or the intention to do so. So, intentions are important, as are the people who want to deliver, and their belief in it.

Q. What advice did Amit Shah give you when you took over?

A. We have known each other for years, so there was no specific advice as such. He told me that since I knew his interest in the party, he would be there anytime I needed him. Frankly, I never felt alone or that I had to deliver on my own. There is so much support I get from the party.

Q. Which of Shah's qualities have you learnt from?

A. I wouldn't use the word learnt, but there are certain things I admire about him: his immense insight, strategy and planning. He will pull out 10 dimensions to any development or problem, its different angles. He gives deep thought to things.

Q. What advice did Prime Minister Narendra Modi give you when you became party president?

A. I have been interacting with him for 30 years and whatever advice he has given me has been worth learning from. For example, he regularly pushes us to think 20 years ahead. I have also not seen a leader as thoroughly organised as he is. The smallest problem is addressed, for which systems are developed so that it can be understood and things are worked out accordingly. From anticipating things, to analysing their root cause, to taking people along and vision... many such wise things come from him.

Q. Coming to the current round of assembly elections, the BJP relies heavily on Brand Modi to boost its chances. Can the party win without him?

A. There is no doubt that PM Modi is acclaimed as a statesman and someone interested in nation-building not just across the country but internationally. It is our

TAKING CHARGE
Newly-elected BJP president J.P. Nadda with PM Narendra Modi and home minister Amit Shah at the BJP headquarters in Delhi, Jan. 2020

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

ON MODI

“I HAVEN'T SEEN A LEADER AS THOROUGHLY ORGANISED AS MODI*JI*. FROM ANTICIPATING THINGS TO ANALYSING THEIR ROOT CAUSE TO TAKING PEOPLE ALONG TO FORMULATING A VISION. HE PUSHES US TO THINK 20 YEARS AHEAD”

ON AMIT SHAH

“HE HAS IMMENSE INSIGHT, STRATEGY AND PLANNING. HE CAN PULL OUT 10 DIMENSIONS TO ANY DEVELOPMENT OR PROBLEM, ITS DIFFERENT ANGLES. HE GIVES DEEP THOUGHT TO THINGS”

as well as the party’s responsibility to utilise this as best as we can. Fortunately, Prime Minister Modi is totally a man of the organisation. He takes great interest in scouting for talent and grooming them over a period of time. He doesn’t prepare the party just for today, but also for the future. The opportunities that the BJP offers to its cadre to be chief ministers or leaders is unmatched by any political party. Whenever I take any issue to him, he always encourages me to look for good, young talent to give opportunity to. He always enquires about how many youth there are or how we are encouraging rural women and the opportunities we are giving them. You say we rely on him but let me make it clear that he is completely a party man. Whenever we have asked him to campaign, say, even for 15 meetings, he has readily agreed.

Q. Like Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, Narendra Modi too has become a national icon. The question now being asked is: after Modi, who?
A. At this point in time, Modi*ji* is strong enough, he is in full in command, he is going to continue for long and we have to support him. And the party is growing accordingly. For us, it is an opportunity to best utilise this and work under his leadership.

Q. What are the stakes for the BJP in the current five assembly elections?
A. Every election is important. It is our resolve to fight every election with all that we have and in full measure. We see every election as a challenge. We fight aggressively. The game plan is to win. That is our priority. In West Bengal, for instance, we are winning.

Q. What makes you so confident of winning Bengal?
A. The way we have strategised, the way Amit Shah*ji* has strengthened the organisation and the way Prime Minister Modi has raised issues that have exposed Mamata. People in Bengal were supporting her only because they thought there was no alternative. Now they regard the BJP as an alternative. The TMC brought terror, *tollabazi* (extortion), the politics of physically liquidating political opponents. We are committed to making Bengal fearless and free of terror.

Q. Does that strategy include polarisation of votes in the state as we are currently seeing?
A. We never go for polarisation, the Congress and other Opposition parties do. We didn't ask Mamata to get off from her car and have young boys arrested for chanting '*Jai Shree Ram*'. We didn't ask her to give a holiday on Muharram and impose curfew on Ayodhya day. We didn't ask her to halt Durga Puja and Saraswati Puja. She herself did it, and now during elections she is going around with religious bells in both her hands. We are consistent. We are not speaking against any community. Isn't it our responsibility to highlight a wrong and bring it to society's notice? Our agenda is development. And development for all.

Q. There is a decline in Muslim representation in the BJP in elections. We saw what happened in UP.
A. Wherever we get the chance, we try to give them nominations. They are also sent to the Rajya Sabha, made MLCs, given ministries. Our problem is that many of them don't win elections. We have given tickets to Muslims in West Bengal. If the electorate makes them victorious, we will be giving them important positions for sure.

BANDEEP SINGH

Q. Mamata is a clear leader for the TMC but we still do not know who the BJP's CM candidate is. Will it make a difference?
A. It does not make a difference, as we saw in the Uttar Pradesh assembly election in 2017. Those who support us, believe in our ideology and admire the BJP's stand on local issues and see PM Modi as their leader...that is what matters. During the last assembly poll in Uttarakhand, people voted for PM Modi despite it being a local election. People voted for Modi*ji* in Maharashtra and Haryana, not in the recent round, but the last time when there was no clarity on leadership. We have already said that in Bengal, the chief minister will be a son of the soil.

Q. You have a sitting CM in Assam, yet you haven't declared him your chief ministerial candidate.
A. The declaration happens only when we don't have a leader. If (Prem Kumar) Dhumal*ji* was chief minister, he was also our chief ministerial candidate. If Sarbananda Sonowal is our chief minister in Assam, he is our leader there. All posters project him. He had to be projected in the previous election as there was no leadership and it was also a matter of strategy.

Q. On the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), you seem to have one stand in Assam and another in Bengal. Why the duality?
A. We have the same stand in both states. I said very clearly in the manifesto release programme in Assam that it is a central law. It is to be enforced both in letter and spirit. Why should we play politics with it? The CAA was passed in the national interest.

Q. The TMC accuses West Bengal governor Jagdeep Dhankhar of abusing his powers and of being a handyman of the BJP. You seem to be following in the footsteps of the Congress when it comes to pliant governors.
A. No, he has never done that. Dhankhar*ji* is legally and constitutionally very sound. He knows his role, his place. The style of functioning the chief minister practised did not come under the constitutional ambit, so she had to be reminded time and again [by him]. Had the governor done any wrong, they would not have spared him.

Q. One has lost count of the number of TMC MLAs who've joined BJP. If you come to power, how will you

ON WEST BENGAL

“PEOPLE HAVE BEEN SUPPORTING MAMATA ONLY BECAUSE THEY THOUGHT THERE WAS NO ALTERNATIVE. NOW THEY REGARD THE BJP AS AN ALTERNATIVE. WE ARE COMMITTED TO MAKING BENGAL FEARLESS AND FREE OF TERROR”

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ON NOT HAVING A CM FACE

“IT DOES NOT MAKE A DIFFERENCE, AS WE SAW IN THE 2017 UP ASSEMBLY ELECTION. THOSE WHO SUPPORT US, BELIEVE IN OUR IDEOLOGY, ADMIRE OUR STAND ON LOCAL ISSUES AND SEE PM MODI AS THEIR LEADER...THAT IS WHAT MATTERS”

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ON POLARISATION

“WE DIDN’T ASK MAMATA TO HALT DURGA AND SARASWATI PUJAS, SHE DID IT HERSELF. NOW, DURING THE ELECTIONS, SHE IS GOING AROUND WITH RELIGIOUS BELLS IN BOTH HER HANDS”

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ON CONGRESS

“THE CONGRESS KEPT TALKING OF ‘*GARIBI HATAO*’ BUT DID NOTHING. WHAT DOES *GARIBI HATAO* MEAN? POVERTY RESOLUTION, ERADICATION. IT IS THE BJP GOVT THAT HAS EMPOWERED THE POOR”

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ON BRAND MODI

“THE PM IS SEEN AS A STATESMAN INTERESTED IN NATION-BUILDING. IT IS THE PARTY’S RESPONSIBILITY TO BEST UTILISE HIS SERVICES FOR THE POLL CAMPAIGN”

^ **POLL POSITION** Nadda flagging off the Pariborton Yatra in Bengal this February

ensure you do not become TMC 2.0, plus Hindutva?
A. Those who have come to us have rejected the TMC culture. They were not happy there, so they came here. Our system is so strong that they are now working within our system. It is our confidence. It is our party’s inbuilt system, so we are not worried, those who come to us can mingle and be accommodated within us.

Q. Does it not disillusion your cadre that they do all the hard work for so long and some outsiders come and walk away with the spoils?
A. We have a system that ensures we talk to all. You have to deal with a person who has put in 20-30 years with full sensitivity. We need to take care of all. We take out past statistics and discuss their winnability and show them why we are doing what we are doing. In politics, we have to make sure we enhance our party, enlarge it, without compromising on our basic principles. All this is done in a family. This is a natural process. We have to move forward, and our cadre understands that.

Q. In Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh, too, the BJP has been expanding inorganically by taking in defectors from other parties. Isn’t it difficult to mould them into the BJP culture and not cause disunity?
A. My personal experience is that they have left their respective parties because their working system was unscientific and they were dejected by it. They find themselves in a much better position in our party because our system of functioning is very scientific. When they come to us, they are surprised. They say that for 30 years, we did not get the kind of respect or position we get here. So, it is a two-way effort, they are happy and the BJP also builds capacity. It is such a well-knit, scientifically-established organisation that anybody who joins us is much happier.

Q. The BJP was once seen as a principled party; now, there is a Congress-isation of the party. It is willing to break other parties to come to power at any cost.

A. Not at all. Tell me, how have our resolutions, principles and working style been diluted in the past 5-6 years? Where have we compromised on our original ethos? Nowhere. And those who have come have accepted this system. Our system is such that all are accommodated, there is no problem at all. Others can learn from it.

Q. The Congress alleged its MLAs were paid money to topple its government in MP. An attempt was made in Rajasthan too. Isn't the BJP being opportunistic?

A. No, it is not. A bad craftsman always blames his tools. What was Kamal Nath doing in Madhya Pradesh that made 19 [Congress] MLAs come to us? Why blame us? You can accuse us, but the truth is you are unable to take care of your flock. Your members are leaving you and coming to us because maybe you are not respecting them. They are happy joining the BJP and we have not made any compromises. The BJP is a big family, unlike the Congress where 3-4 family members are running it, which makes it difficult for others to realise their aspirations. Here we are taking care of crores and crores of party workers and keeping them within the system. This cohesion is our strength.

Q. Despite its big wins in the general elections and in states, the BJP remains insecure. Why does the party pursue each state election so aggressively to capture power?

A. It is because we have gained in basic strength which we can now translate (into power), so why waste time? If we want to change and make India progressive and have a dynamic leader like Narendra Modi*ji*, then why should the party sleep? We have to take advantage and make sure we can bring change to the common man at the grassroots level. People have been saying that the prime minister's pro-poor policies, such as the Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan, Ujjwala Yojana and Saubhagya Yojana, to empower people at the grassroots in the past six years have been much more than any previous government. You need to understand the huge empowerment of the poor that has taken place. That is why the poor and women vote for Modi*ji*.

Q. The BJP has appropriated the Congress's pro-poor plank and has simultaneously announced a push towards privatisation in the recent budget. So, what ideology does the BJP stand for?

A. Firstly, its basic principle was integral humanism, which covers everything. Then it was translated into Antyodaya, or last-man delivery. So, practically, wherever we had chief ministers, we had the Antyodaya programme. The Congress kept talking of '*garibi hatao*' but did nothing. What does *garibi hatao* mean? Poverty resolution, eradication. We empowered the poor. There was no provision for food, we started the Antyodaya Anna Yojana; there is no drinking water, we are finding solutions; if there were no schools in villages, we built them. During Atal Bihari Vajpayee*ji*'s tenure, we launched the Sarvashiksha Abhiyaan to open up schools in India's remotest parts. All these were part of the Antyodaya programme. Now, we are taking it forward with '*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikaas aur Sabka Vishwaas*'. This is our target. We are looking for solutions and strategies to achieve it and can't be stuck with one idea. There is no point in being rigid. Or divide it (development) into watertight compartments.

ON PRIVATISATION

"A RIVER DOES NOT FOLLOW THE SAME COURSE EVERYWHERE, IT HAS TO KEEP FLOWING. WE HAVE TO ENHANCE OUR EXISTING CAPACITIES–THESE COULD BE IN GOVERNMENT COMMAND OR WITH PRIVATE PLAYERS"

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ON FARMERS' UNREST

"TILL NOW, THOSE AGITATING AGAINST THE FARM LAWS HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO ARTICULATE WHAT IS WRONG WITH THEM. THEY ARE INSISTING THEY BE REPEALED ALTOGETHER. THIS IN ITSELF SHOWS THEY HAVE NO COUNTER"

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ON RELATIONS WITH RSS

"OUR COMMUNICATION WITH THEM IS PERFECT. IF THERE IS CONFUSION ON ANY ISSUE, WE RECTIFY MATTERS. WE MOVE AHEAD DEMOCRATICALLY"

……

ON MAHARASHTRA

"POLITICS WITHOUT MORALITY IS DETRIMENTAL. THE MVA ALLIANCE IS SINKING ITS OWN SHIP"

BANDEEP SINGH

You can't be progressive if your mind is fixed.

Q. What justifies the current push towards privatisation?
A. There should not be double standards. If we are talking of privatisation now, it is because there are times when the government needs to intervene and there are times when it needs others to take things forward. So, what is the problem if there is privatisation of industry? Or if there is public-private partnership? A river does not follow the same course everywhere, it has to keep flowing. Our intentions are clear: the country must move forward. All our efforts need to go into making that happen. We have to enhance our existing capacities—these could be in government command or with private players—but we have to take everyone with us. Even investors from foreign countries are welcome, but FDI must come on our terms and not be detrimental to the nation.

Q. Already, several RSS-affiliated organisations have objected to privatisation. How do you propose to dissuade the opposition from within?
A. We have set out the principles and the roadmap is fixed. On the way, if someone has some confusion, it is our duty to rectify that. We will move ahead democratically and not in a coercive manner while engaging with them. And we will move forward like a family.

Q. The recent reshuffle in the RSS organisation has seen a generational shift. Will this help relations with the BJP?
A. Our communication (with the RSS) is perfect. Having generational shifts is a continuous process in our organisations, and we ensure it happens smoothly.

Q. The Modi government faced fierce resistance when it tried to open up the farming sector to private capital. Do you think the party failed to effectively communicate with the farmers?
A. It is not so, we did communicate. The people who are protesting have different reasons. We will see how to address their apprehensions and objections. Till now, those agitating against the farm laws have not been able to articulate what is wrong with them. We have asked them what is wrong with the law, and are ready to make corrections. They are insisting the laws be repealed altogether. This argument itself means they don't have a counter. When some people [with vested interests] come together, they build up an environment [of distrust]. We will see how to deal with it. Whenever you introduce reforms, status quoists take time to understand it. Let it happen.

Q. Where does the government stand on the farmers' issue currently?
A. The government is ready to have whatever discussions needed. Like we said, we will hold the laws till then. We have asked them to bring their own proposals and come for discussions whenever they wish. Our stand remains.

Q. NDA ally Akali Dal walked out of the cabinet and the alliance saying that they were not consulted on the farm reforms?
A. Not just Prime Minister Modi, successive governments have had consultations on the subject for the past 15 years. These farm reforms are not a one-day affair. Many committees and commissions have been set up, and reports published. All parties were consulted. It was their (Akali Dal's) political call. Some people succumb to pressure. They may have thought that Amarinder Singh would create trouble for them in Punjab's politics. And they had their own reasons for that. We respect that. We didn't ask them to go. It is also not true that they were not consulted. Everything was done in a crystal-clear manner. All cabinet notings were prepared, discussions took place on all matters and the PIB (Press Information Bureau) released the detailed note on the cabinet's decisions after all discussions. At my residence, we had a meeting of 30 ministers for three days, to chalk out the plans detailing the reforms and how we will implement them. Everyone accepted it.

Q. Akali Dal president Sukhbir Badal has alleged that the NDA has had no meetings recently and the BJP has been taking unilateral decisions without consulting its allies, including on the farm reforms.

A. We are very much talking to our allies. There have been four meetings of NDA leaders after the 2019 [election]—two physical meetings before the [2020] budget and two virtual meetings.

Q. With the BJP becoming all-powerful, is the NDA becoming irrelevant?

A. No, we respect all our allies, and see to it that they are accommodated as far as possible. We need to move ahead and grow. BJP has 303 seats, but we have maintained the spirit of NDA. We will not let our large heart shrink for our friends and allies.

Q. The BJP became the senior partner in the alliance with JD(U) in Bihar under your presidency. But now there is dissonance between the two coalition partners. What are you doing to resolve it?

A. We will use a human approach. We are confident that with talking, we can resolve all miscommunication and misunderstanding. Secondly, there are some people who have vested interests. During the entire stretch of the Bihar poll, people kept asking me if we would make Nitish Kumar the chief minister if we got more seats than the JD(U). I'd tell them, we will. I'd say, even if we get 100 per cent seats (BJP contested 110 of 243) seats, we will make him chief minister. We are people who value commitments made to allies and friends.

Q. When are JD(U) members expected to join the Union cabinet?

A. We had made them an offer during the formation of the second Modi government. That offer is still open. It is their internal affair and they need to take a call. We will be happy to take them in.

Q. Will there be a reshuffle or expansion in the Union cabinet soon?

A. This is the prime minister's prerogative. We are in the middle of a few challenges first because of Covid and now because of the vaccination programme. Even in Parliament, there is restrictive seating. The prime minister will take a call on it (cabinet changes).

Q. What is your game plan for the south? What is your assessment of the BJP's chances in the southern states going to the polls?

SOUTHERN SOJOURN: Nadda in Budalur, Tamil Nadu, Mar. 26

A. The southern game plan is also to win. We have a positive agenda and we will try and bring all the nationalist forces on a common platform, whosoever wants to be a part of nation-building. In Tamil Nadu, we are contesting 20 seats and we will do well. We have a good adjustment with our ally AIADMK, and the NDA will win there. We will form the government in Puducherry, where we have nine seats, the AIADMK four and the NR Congress the rest. In Kerala, we will put up a good show. Last time, we had one seat, now we will grow. In Telangana, the civic elections have shown that the BJP has emerged as the principal opposition party against the ruling TRS.

Q. What about the Sasikala factor in Tamil Nadu? Will she make a difference?

A. It's for the AIADMK to decide, it is their party's affair. People approached us [to align with Sasikala] but we said no. We are with the AIADMK and will go with them only.

Q. Why did the BJP push out the Congress-led government headed by V. Narayanaswamy just a week before the election in Puducherry?

A. We didn't do anything. He couldn't save his own house.

Q. A serious situation has developed in Maharashtra with the state police commissioner making allegations against the Maharashtra home minister. Where does the BJP stand on this issue?

A. I believe politics without morality is detrimental. The day this government was formed, I said unholy alliances will not produce holy results. I stand by it even today. The Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) was an alliance of three greedy parties to make the BJP sit in the opposition benches. What else can one expect from such allies? They have been caught extorting Rs 100 crore. They will never mend their ways.

Q. Is the BJP likely push for president's rule in Maharashtra?

A. We believe in democratic systems. We are a principled party. The MVA are sinking their own ship.

THE SOUTHERN AGENDA

“WE HAVE A POSITIVE AGENDA AND WILL TRY AND BRING ALL NATIONALIST FORCES ON A COMMON PLATFORM, WHOSOEVER WANTS TO BE A PART OF NATION-BUILDING”

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ON THE NDA

“BJP HAS 303 SEATS, YET WE HAVE MAINTAINED THE SPIRIT OF NDA. WE RESPECT OUR ALLIES AND TRY TO ACCOMMODATE THEM AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE. WE DON’T LET OUR LARGE HEART SHRINK FOR OUR FRIENDS AND ALLIES”

……

ON DEFECTORS

“WHY BLAME US? THE TRUTH IS THAT THE CONGRESS CANNOT TAKE CARE OF ITS FLOCK. ITS MEMBERS ARE LEAVING AND COMING TO US BECAUSE MAYBE THEY DON’T GET RESPECT THERE. THEY ARE HAPPY JOINING THE BJP. WE HAVE NOT MADE ANY COMPROMISES”

……

ON BORDER ISSUES

“UNDER PRIME MINISTER MODI, THE INDIAN ARMY HAS BEEN GIVEN FULL SUPPORT AND THE BORDERS HAVE BEEN MADE SECURE”

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AFTER MODI, WHO?

“AT THIS POINT IN TIME, MODI*JI* IS STRONG ENOUGH, HE IS IN FULL COMMAND, HE WILL CONTINUE FOR LONG AND WE HAVE TO SUPPORT HIM. AND THE PARTY IS GROWING ACCORDINGLY. FOR US, IT IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BEST UTILISE THIS AND WORK UNDER HIS LEADERSHIP”

Q. Your new CM in Uttarakhand, Tirath Singh Rawat, made a controversial statement about women wearing ripped jeans. What do you have to say?

A. We always take it very seriously. I take care of it personally. I have told many of them to stop doing such things and have given them advice. Sometimes, such things are said unintentionally, sometimes they are intentional. But the process of rectification is ongoing.

Q. Why did the party change the leadership in the state, with the assembly poll just a year away?

A. We need to work at a far greater speed, that’s why new people are given a chance to work. We will use his (Trivendra Singh Rawat’s) services as well.

Q. What is your strategy for the 2022 Uttar Pradesh assembly election?

A. We have undertaken organisational strengthening in UP and will win there.

Q. Will there be a change in leadership before the election as in Uttarakhand? Or will Yogi Adityanath continue as CM?

A. We are fighting under his (Yogi Adityanath’s) leadership. Our parliamentary board will take note of the situation and discuss such things at the appropriate time.

Q. Coming to foreign affairs, what are the party’s views on the ongoing border issues with China and Pakistan?

A. We are very sensitive and very strong on border issues. We have been very clear about it. All scientific approaches for sealing the borders are taking place, the morale of the police and paramilitary forces has been taken care of, the army has been given full authority as far as securing the borders is concerned and it has also produced results.

Q. Pakistan has recently made some overtures on the LoC. Can we move forward in our relations with Pakistan now?

A. Our external affairs minister is very competent to speak on this issue. Our party position in general is that yes, without compromising our national interests, friendship with our neighbours is fine, but it is for the prime minister to take a call on this matter.

Q. Can we expect assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir?

A. That call too will be taken by the prime minister. There are also some issues related to delimitation. A call will then be taken accordingly.

Q. Will statehood be restored to J&K?

A. PM Modi had already made a statement on this. He will take a call as to when it is to be done. ■

THE 'T' COMPANY

Thane emerges as a crucial link in Bombgate. The suspected cops in the case had all been posted in the satellite city to Mumbai's north. The murderer and his victim lived there too

BY KIRAN D. TARE

Nearly a month after an explosives-laden SUV was found parked a short distance from Mukesh Ambani's residence, Antilia, all investigative leads seem to be converging in Thane, a satellite city north of Mumbai.

The two vehicles—a white Innova, allegedly driven by assistant police inspector Sachin Vaze, and the light-green Scorpio, allegedly driven by one of his aides—started towards South Mumbai from Thane, 30 km away, on February 24. On the intervening night of February 24-25, the Scorpio was left parked 500 metres away from the Ambani residence on Carmichael Road, with 20 sticks of commercial blasting gelatin and a note threatening the family inside the vehicle.

The National Investigation Agency (NIA), the central agency now probing the incident and the murder of the original Scorpio owner, businessman Mansukh Hiran, believes the conspiracy was hatched in Vaze's fourth-floor office just two floors below the Mumbai Police Commissioner's office at Crawford Market. Vaze headed the sensitive Crime Intelligence Unit (CIU) within the crime branch, a team of 20 officers and 70 constables tasked with investigating crime across the city's zonal jurisdictions.

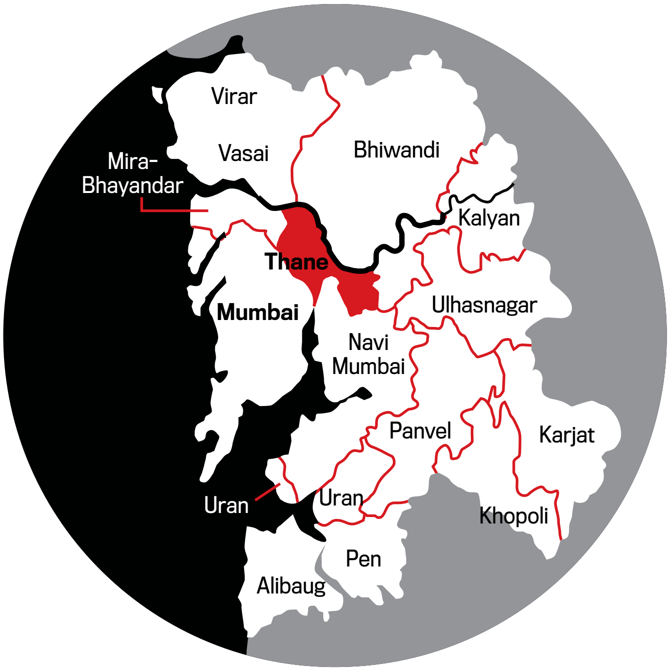
Vaze and Hiran had known each other for five-odd years. Both lived in Thane, their houses just 4 km apart. Hiran ran a car decor shop near his house on Ambedkar Road, close to the Civil Hospital. He also had an office in Crawford Market, close to the police commissioner's HQ.

Hiran left his shop on March 4 evening after receiving a WhatsApp call from one 'Tawde' of the Kandivali crime branch in connection with the Scorpio case. Hiran told his wife Vimal his 'police friend' would also be there at this meeting on Ghodbunder Road, a busy 15-km stretch that connects Thane to Mumbai's northern suburbs. Ghodbunder or 'horse port' was where horses from the Middle East landed in Bombay centuries ago. Until a decade ago, this secluded highway flanked by dense forest on one side and the Thane creek on the other was a favourite spot for 'encounter specialists' to eliminate criminals. The highway has become gentrified since, with housing societies on either side and commercial complexes selling for a pricey Rs 12,000 per square feet.

The next day, on March 5, Hiran's bloated body surfaced in the brackish waters of the Thane creek at Retibunder near Mumbra, around 10 km from his house, and 20 km from Ghodbunder where he was last spotted. Hiran's hands were tied and his mouth stuffed with handkerchiefs. The spot from where his body was recovered can be seen from the unique ship funnel-shaped hilltop

ANSHUMAN POYREKAR/ GETTY IMAGES

^ MAN IN THE MUDDLE
Vaze being taken to NIA court on March 14



holiday home on Parsik Hill, built by the late actor Nutan and her naval officer husband Rajnish Behl in the 1960s.

It has been a month since Bombgate exploded, but we are nowhere closer to the truth. The NIA has not yet revealed Vaze's motive in allegedly planting the Scorpio bomb or murdering Hiran. They don't know yet whether the now-suspended cop was acting on his own or at someone's behest. What we do know is that Vaze was reinducted into the force on June 6, 2020, on the recommendations of a committee headed by former Mumbai police chief Param Bir Singh. He was instantly made head of the CIU. Within a week, he was handed his first high-profile case—the death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput on June 14, 2020. Vaze also investigated the suicide of architect Anvay Naik and the November 2020 TRP scam in which Republic TV editor-in-chief Arnab Goswami is an accused.

The NIA is expanding its net of investigation with a clear focus on the Thane connections in the case. On March 30, the agency seized one seven-seat Mitsubishi Outlander from Kamothe in Navi Mumbai—the seventh vehicle to be recovered in this case. The SUV is registered in the name of one Sachin Vaze. The agency is trying to confirm if it's the same Vaze who is in their custody. They will also investigate whether this is the car in which Hiran was smothered to death.

The agency, which took over the investigation of Hiran's murder on March 24, believes the 48-year-old was killed because he refused to be a part of the Antilia conspiracy. When Vaze tried to tell him he would be arrested and bailed out soon, Hiran refused. He reportedly told Vaze his role was limited to handing over his Scorpio. He might even have hinted at revealing the conspiracy, which possibly sealed his fate.

Hiran's post-mortem report, which INDIA TODAY has exclusively accessed, reveals he had abrasions on his face. A senior doctor at a government hospital in Thane says his captors had beaten him brutally before killing him. The NIA probe has revealed that the 'police officer friend' Hiran mentioned was none another than Vaze. The agency suspects he was present when Hiran was killed and later thrown into the creek.

Vaze tried his best to mislead the investigation. He conducted a raid on one Tipsy bar in Dongri between 11.45 pm and 1.30 am on March 4-5 when Hiran vanished. He did not seize any papers or register any case. The NIA believes he cooked up an alibi for himself to establish he was in south Mumbai, whereas he was present in Thane, 40 km away, two hours before the raid. On March 4 evening, Vaze left his mobile phone with a junior officer in his Crawford Market office, and walked three km south to the General Post Office, so that his mobile location would be traced to his office on that day. Interestingly, a CCTV camera in the vicinity caught him walking there.

Investigators believe Hiran loaned the Scorpio to Vaze in exchange for a personal favour the cop may have done for him. Vinod Hiran, Mansukh's elder brother, denies they were friends and insists they had a purely business relationship. "Mansukh knew Vaze only as his customer, they were not friends. Mansukh never brought him home. I never met Vaze," Vinod told INDIA TODAY. Crazy about cars, Vaze had borrowed the light-green Scorpio from Hiran earlier too, in November 2020. Hiran's shop was not very big, but he was known for his prompt service. The shop has been closed since his murder.

However, there is much more to this satellite township on the northeastern edge of Mumbai than the co-location of the alleged murderer and his victim.

The NIA is poring over the call data records and cellphone locations of several Mumbai police officials. At least one police officer from Thane, the NIA suspects, escorted Vaze from the Eastern Express Highway to Ghodbunder Road on March 4 night. The officer's mobile location has been traced near Retibunder on that night. This officer, who has not yet been named, works in the anti-extortion cell. He claims he was returning to his home in Kalyan (20 km northeast of Thane) via Mumbra, which is why his cellphone location showed he was near Retibunder. The NIA is also questioning the CIU officer who reportedly kept Vaze's mobile phone with him on March 4 to conceal his real location.

The evidence is now piling up. On March 28, Vaze led the NIA to the spot where he had tossed the hard drive, printer, laptop, two CPUs and two fake number plates in the Mithi river near the Bandra-Kurla Complex. Divers extracted the evidence from the heavily-polluted river. Forensic expert Amol Deshmukh, an advisor to the state's forensic laboratory, says that retrieving the evidence from the gadgets will require some effort as they had been in water for a long while.

DIVYESH SINGH

^ **HARD DIVE**
Evidence being recovered from Mithi river

WHY THANE MATTERS

Thane is one of the 10 police commissionerates in Maharashtra. At 147 sq. km, the city is twice the size of Mumbai island city (Mahim to Colaba) and India's 15th largest city. Crime is not as high as in Mumbai. While the metropolis registers 100 cases of public scuffles and burglaries per month, Thane has only a third of such cases. However, the number of cases pertaining to extortion and land deals is much higher in Thane as it is the new hotbed of real estate. It is also under constant watch for communal tension in areas like Mumbra and Bhiwandi, which have witnessed communal riots in the past. A former police officer calls Thane the antechamber for the Mumbai and other commissionerates, the ideal parking spot for police officials who have 'other uses'. "It is out of the Mumbai police commissionerate's limits, yet not too far from the metropolis," he says.

In his nine-month stint at the Mumbai Crime Branch before he was suspended and later arrested by the NIA on March 13, Vaze reported directly to police commissioner Param Bir Singh, bypassing four levels of command in the crime branch. Both Singh and Vaze served in the Thane police commissionerate for several years. Vaze was first posted in Mumbra, a Thane suburb, and later in the anti-extortion cell, between 1992 and 1997. Singh was police commissioner there between 2015 and 2018.

In 2015, BJP supporters were aghast when then chief minister Devendra Fadnavis appointed Singh as the Thane police commissioner. As additional commissioner of police in the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad, Singh had been accused of torturing 2008 Malegaon bomb blast accused Sadhvi Pragya. Her family members had alleged Singh beat her, forced her to eat non-vegetarian food and watch pornographic clips.

Fadnavis's decision to appoint Singh in Thane, bypassing three of his seniors, had left the force divided. Singh had an eventful tenure in Thane, where he busted an illegal call-centre and drugs racket. His team had arrested alleged drug trafficker Vicky Goswami, the husband of actor Mamata Kulkarni. Another accused, Manoj Jain, was allegedly involved in manufacturing and exporting ephedrine, a chemical used in drugs.

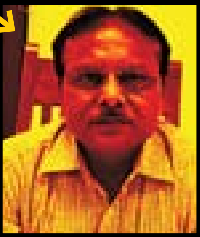
THE THANE CONNECTION

All the police officers who have vital information in the Antilia-Hiran case were posted together in the satellite city till a year and a half ago

SACHIN VAZE ▶
A resident of Thane, he was Singh's most trusted aide till the latter was shunted out as Mumbai police commissioner on March 17. Vaze, now under arrest and suspension, is the prime suspect in parking an explosives-laden Scorpio near Mukesh Ambani's residence and the murder of Scorpio owner Mansukh Hiran.

PARAM BIR SINGH
As the commissioner of police in Thane between 2015 and 2018, Singh ensured his trusted officers get prominent postings in his jurisdiction ▼

◀ PARAG MANERE
The DCP (deputy superintendent of police) was with the Thane crime branch when Singh was commissioner. Currently, Manere is with the economic offences wing of the Mumbai Police. The NIA believes he can help join the dots between the suspected officers as he might have crucial information on their money transactions. The agency has requested him to cooperate.



◀ SANJAY PATIL
The assistant commissioner of police (social service branch) was part of Singh's team in Thane. Singh again made him a member of his team when he became Mumbai police commissioner on Feb. 28, 2020. Singh has presented his chat with Patil on March 16 as evidence that home minister Anil Deshmukh had given the police a target of collecting Rs 100 crore a month from bars and restaurants.

◀ PRADEEP SHARMA
He was head of the anti-extortion cell in Thane from 2017-19 when Singh was commissioner. When Sharma opted for voluntary retirement in August 2019, a month before the assembly election, Singh instantly recommended that he be relieved.

MANSUKH HIRAN
The NIA suspects the Thane resident was used as a courier in the planting of explosives. It was his vehicle that was laden with gelatin sticks and parked near Antilia. It is not yet clear whether he voluntarily participated in the plot or was coerced into doing so. He was found dead on March 5.

◀ VINAYAK SHINDE
The former constable is a resident of Thane suburb Kalva. The ATS arrested him on March 24 for allegedly killing Hiran. Shinde, along with 12 other policemen, was convicted in 2011 for the fake encounter of Ramnarayan Gupta alias Lakhan Bhaiyya. He was a member of Sharma's team at that time.

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

The fake call centre was operated by several youths, who would pose as employees of Internal Revenue Service, US, and seek money from US citizens to settle matters.

Singh and Vaze, however, have never worked together. The latter had been under suspension since 2004 over the custodial death of Khwaja Yunus, a suspect in the 2003 BEST bus blast in Ghatkopar. However, another figure known to both of them, joined Singh in the Thane police commissionerate. Pradeep Sharma, head of the anti-extortion cell, located his office within a kilometre of the police headquarters at Thane. Sharma, an erstwhile 'encounter cop', had been Vaze's boss when he was the CIU head in 2001. Vaze had joined the CIU as a cyber expert but drifted into operations. He had 63 encounters to his credit before his first tryst with infamy in 2004.

Sharma's own career was nearly finished by the 2006 Lakhan Bhaiyya case, in which his police squad had allegedly kidnapped the Navi Mumbai-based gangster, brought him to Versova and shot him dead. While 12 policemen were convicted of the murder in 2013, Sharma was acquitted for lack of evidence. Ramprasad Gupta, Lakhan Bhaiyya's lawyer brother, challenged Sharma's acquittal in the Bombay High Court in 2014. The case is still pending.

Singh is believed to have given Sharma a free hand. In 2018, Sharma arrested Dawood's brother Iqbal Kaskar from his house on Pakmodia Street near Bhendi Bazaar. The area was under the Mumbai Police's jurisdiction but Sharma, it is said, did not take them into confidence as the case was registered in Thane. Fadnavis issued Param Bir Singh a stern warning after then Mumbai police chief D.D. Padsalgikar objected.

Sharma took voluntary retirement from the police force in August 2019 to contest the assembly election on a Shiv Sena ticket. He was fielded from the Nalasopara assembly constituency north of Thane where Vaze reportedly spent a month campaigning for his former boss. Sharma was defeated by Kshitij Thakur of the Bahujan Vikas Aghadhi by over 40,000 votes. (Sharma could not be contacted as his cell phone was unreachable).

There is nothing so far to connect Sharma to Hiran's murder except the fact that Vinayak Shinde, whom the ATS arrested on March 4 in connection with Hiran's murder, was once a constable in his unit. Shinde, a resident of Kalva, a suburb of Thane, was also involved in Lakhan Bhaiyya's fake encounter for which the HC convicted him in 2011. Shinde has been out on furlough for over a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. He reportedly met Vaze at the latter's office in January in search of work. The NIA believes it was at this meeting that the Bombgate conspiracy was hatched. The printer on which the threat letter to Mukesh Ambani was drafted, and which was recovered from the Mithi river, also belonged to Shinde. A junior at the Thane College from where he graduated in 1994 recalls Shinde as not being particularly bright. "He was always busy in students' union activities."

As revelations from Bombgate continue to trickle in, a one-member committee of retired Bombay High Court chief justice Kailash Chandiwal was constituted on March 30 at Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray's behest. Tasked with investigating Param Bir Singh's charges of bribery against home minister Anil Deshmukh, the committee has been given six months' time. However, the government is under no compulsion to make its report public since it has not been constituted under the Commission of Inquiry Act. Justice Chandiwal, who retired in 2014, had famously sentenced police constable Sunil More in 2006 to 12 years of rigorous imprisonment for raping a minor at the police post at Marine Lines.

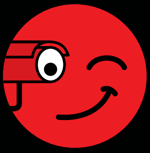
Meanwhile, the political intrigues continue. On March 27, NCP chief Sharad Pawar and his trusted lieutenant Praful Patel reportedly met Union home minister Amit Shah in Ahmedabad. While Patel denied any such meeting, Shah was cryptic in his reply. "Not all things should be made public," he told reporters on March 28.

Fadnavis, meanwhile, has kept the heat turned on the Sena by highlighting the political pressure put on Singh to reinstate Vaze, a former Sainik. Sena leader Sanjay Raut told reporters on March 29 that he had warned his party leaders against reinstating Vaze, given his dubious credentials. "I had told them that Vaze would become a pain in the neck one day," Raut said. "The government has learned a lesson from this whole episode." Raut's statement is a tacit admission that the Sena might have erred in swiftly rushing to the tainted police officer's defence. Chief Minister Thackeray had on March 10 defended Vaze, saying he was not 'Osama bin Laden that he could be hanged without a trial'. As the NIA investigations continue to uncover the wider conspiracy, the Sena is clearly unsettled. If the central agency unearths a political connection in the Antilia case, it could impact the Sena's fortunes in the crucial Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) elections in February 2022. The game of smoke and mirrors in Bombgate may well clear by then, and the naked truth may cause the Sena more than a little embarrassment. ■

VAZE'S WEB

The suspended assistant police inspector is at the centre of all that is dubious in Bombgate

Fake ID The NIA suspects Vaze stayed at the 5-star Trident Hotel in south Mumbai between January and February using a fake Aadhaar card in the name of Sushant Khamkar. The bag scanner at the hotel showed huge cash in his hand bag.



Missing evidence Vaze stands accused of trying to destroy the video data record (VDR), the CCTV footage from cameras installed outside his office. The VDR reportedly contains his movements in the six cars he allegedly used to roam in the city. The NIA found two CPUs, one hard disk, one laptop and two fake number plates from Mithi river. It suspects Vaze tried to destroy data in these devices and threw them in the river near Bandra-Kurla Complex.

Attempt to mislead Vaze conducted a raid on one Tipsy bar in Dongri between 11.45 pm and 1.30 am on the intervening night of March 4-5. He did not seize any papers or register any case. The NIA believes he was cooking an alibi for himself to establish his location in south Mumbai whereas he was present in Thane, 40 km away, two hours before the raid. He also left his mobile phone behind in his Crawford Market office on March 4 evening and walked towards General Post Office, 3 km away, so that his mobile location could not be traced. Interestingly, a CCTV camera on the road caught him walking at the time.

The Hiran murder When Hiran received a WhatsApp call on March 4 evening, he told wife Vimal he was going to meet a cop named Tawade on Ghodbunder Road. He also told her his 'police friend' would be there, who, the NIA suspects, was Vaze himself. The agency believes Hiran was killed around 10 pm and his body thrown in the Thane creek later in Vaze's presence. The next day, Vaze visited the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Hospital at Kalva where the post-mortem on Hiran's body was conducted. He spoke to the doctors before they began the post-mortem.

Derailing probe On March 6, a day after Hiran's murder, Vaze claimed, the businessman had, fed up of "harassment from police and media", committed suicide. Vaze claimed Hiran had written the CM a letter to the effect. There was no such letter.

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BUSINESSES ARE MORE RESILIENT AFTER A YEAR OF THE PANDEMIC, BUT THEY WILL BE SEVERELY TESTED AGAIN AS INDIA BATTLES A SECOND WAVE OF COVID-19

By M.G. ARUN

W

When India went into one of the harshest lockdowns in the world on March 25 last year, the impact on businesses was so grave that the economy went into recession—for the first time in 40 years. Now, as the country battles a second wave of Covid-19, with active cases rising sharply by the day (552,566 cases as on March 31), there is heightened fear that whatever economic recovery has been achieved in the past six months could be wiped out.

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) governor Shaktikanta Das, on March 25, expressed confidence that the second wave of Covid will not impede economic recovery, and that the economy would grow at the 11 per cent the central bank forecast for 2021-22. But industry experts feel the economy's resilience will be tested by the severity of the Covid wave and be critically determined by the pace at which India vaccinates its population, particularly those in the 20-60 age group, who constitute most of the workforce.

No lockdowns have been announced yet and the Centre has left it to the states to decide the extent of restrictions to be imposed. Punjab, Maharashtra and Gujarat are in the midst of their worst outbreaks. Maharashtra and Gujarat

ANSHUMAN POYREKAR/ GETTY IMAGES

together account for 22 per cent of India's GDP. The rising cases and possibility of more restrictions in the two states pose a big threat to businesses and the economy at large.

While several states announced curbs on Holi gatherings, the Uddhav Thackeray government imposed night curfew across Maharashtra from March 28. Commercial establishments, including hotels, malls and restaurants, have to down their shutters by 7 pm. The restrictions will hit the already reeling food and restaurant business, as well as organised retail, which had reported an upswing in footfalls after several slack months. Maharashtra may eventually have to lock down again if Covid cases keep rising.

A slow recovery

The nationwide lockdown had inflicted heavy losses on businesses across most sectors. While agriculture, where much of the activity is in the rural belts, did not suffer as much, manufacturing and logistics, which were allowed to continue through the lockdown, took a hard hit. Thousands of migrant factory workers left for their hometowns, impacting production and choking supply chains, and trucks were held up on the roads.

> **"WE ARE EMPHASISING TO OUR STAFF, VENDORS AND DISTRIBUTORS THE NEED TO FOLLOW COVID SAFETY PROTOCOLS"**
>
> **R.C. Bhargava**
> Chairman, Maruti Suzuki

Supply chain issues, poor demand and closure of retail outlets rattled industry, especially the automotive and allied sectors. April 2020 became a month of zero vehicle sales, a first in the history of the country's automotive industry. In August 2020, the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) said the lockdown had cost nearly 19 million salaried jobs, not to speak of the setback to the informal sector, which is a major employment provider. The economy plunged into the negative zone, with the GDP contracting 23.9 per cent in the first quarter of 2020-21.

A staggered resumption of economic activity beginning June 2020 saw manufacturing pick up in the subsequent months but the services sector continued to struggle. The growth in the second quarter reflected this rebound in activity as the economy recovered to -7.5 per cent. Driving the recovery was manufacturing, where the contraction was 2.1 per cent compared to 38 per cent in the previous quarter. As many experts had predicted, the economy recovered further in the third quarter, attaining 0.5 per cent growth.

Preparing for the second wave

It's too early to gauge how the second wave of Covid will impact the economy, but learning from the past, businesses are already taking measures to insulate themselves from the potential impact. "The second wave of Covid has not affected us yet. But we are repeatedly emphasising to our staff, distributors and vendors that they need to follow a strict Covid protocol," says R.C. Bhargava, chairman of Maruti Suzuki, India's largest automaker. Be it practising safe distancing at the workplace or keeping shop floors/offices sanitised or wearing masks at all times, businesses are insisting on strict adherence to safety norms.

On the supply chain side, the industry is richer from the experience of the first few months of the pandemic. Companies are identifying alternative vendors should the need arise. There is also an effort at greater cost control, be it in the purchase of raw materials, managing supply chains or running day-to-day operations. "We depend a lot on our vendors, and they know from their experience during the pandemic what is best for them and for us," adds Bhargava.

SAFETY LAST?
Crawford Market in Mumbai on March 27

Except for those engaged in

THE SURVIVAL PLAN

Measures businesses are taking to deal with Covid restrictions in states

- Adhering to safety norms: safe distancing at the workplace, keeping shop floors/ offices sanitised, wearing masks
- Better cost controls, be it purchase of raw materials, managing supply chains or day-to-day operations
- Avoiding inventory pile-up by making stock available through just-in-time practices and lean manufacturing methods
- Keeping alternative vendors on standby in case existing ones fail to deliver
- Developing a robust online strategy to take orders and deliver directly to homes
- Renegotiating with landlords to try and bring office/ shop rentals down
- Opting for more contract/ temporary staff so that downsizing is easier

essential supplies, such as medicines, groceries, and fruits and vegetables, the entire retail sector was battered by the lockdown. Firms are now preparing for the oncoming crisis. "We anticipate things to go wrong again. We have set in place alternative plans to keep businesses running. We are fully prepared," says Kumar Rajagopalan, CEO, Retailers Association of India, the apex body for the organised retail sector. Traversing through a year of adverse conditions, the sector has honed its survival capabilities. "Most retailers are now better adept at how and where to cut costs, where to renegotiate the stocks and how to make stocks available just in time," adds Rajagopalan.

Retails firms are also developing online business strategies to see them through the impending crisis. The informal sector has already been using social media, such as WhatsApp, to take orders and deliver directly to homes. Such modes of communication will become extremely handy to keep businesses running in case of a lockdown.

A key challenge, though, is negotiating the diverse regulations individual states are introducing, some of which border on the bizarre. "In Punjab, no more than 100 people are allowed inside malls at any given time while cinema theatres can host 200 people. Ironically, in many cases, the cinema is located within the mall," points out Rajagopalan. He adds that the industry is fast learning how to work around such issues. "Retailers have developed an agile business model and will go lean," says Rajagopalan. They will also be renegotiating with landlords to try and bring the rentals down and reassessing hiring strategies, taking in more contract workers, for example.

The jobs crisis

Jobs will be one of the biggest casualties if states tighten Covid restrictions. "Even if a store is kept shut for two days in the week, a sixth of the staff may become redundant," predicts Rajagopalan. Weekends account for nearly 45 per cent of the total business in markets and malls, so clamping down on weekend sales will be disastrous, he adds. Maharashtra's decision that shoppers take the rapid antigen test before entering malls could be a huge dampener. It will not only discourage shoppers from visiting malls, but the cost—the Rs 250 per test to be borne by either the shoppers or the malls—will also be a deterrent.

What has also flummoxed businesses is the slower-than-desired pace of the countrywide Covid vaccination drive. When the government began the vaccination programme on January 16, Covid cases were steadily dropping and the country was adding under 15,000 cases daily. By March, cases began to rise quickly. On March 28, India added 62,714 Covid cases—its sharpest one-day spike in almost five months. Around 60 million people had been vaccinated by March 28 and the government has extended the immunisation to all individuals above age 45 from April 1. But Naushad Forbes, co-chairman of Forbes Marshall and former president of CII (Confederation of Indian Industry), is unimpressed. "We have 800 million adults to vaccinate. We have the largest vaccine manufacturers. There is no attempt to understand where the infections are taking place," he complains.

In Pune, which is getting over 6,000 new infections every day, around 25,000 people are being vaccinated daily. "This needs to be scaled up to 100,000 people. There is absolute bureaucratic control," says Forbes. Moreover, vaccines should also be prioritised for what he calls the "frontline economic workforce"—those working in shops, restaurants and so on. Other industry captains have also called for re-strategising the vaccination drive. Anand Mahindra, chairman of the Mahindra Group, feels the youth should be immunised on priority. Referring to the rising Covid count in Maharashtra, Punjab, Karnataka, Kerala, Chhattisgarh and Gujarat, he tweeted on March 24: "I again plead for fully opening vaccination eligibility in these states. Young people are also super spreaders. Widen distribution channels. Please allow companies to take responsibility for the vaccination of their people, especially in factories."

The industry has learnt some very hard lessons from one of the most challenging years in decades and built resilience, but the fresh restrictions being imposed by states in the wake of rising Covid cases are bound to test them again. Much now hinges on how the Covid surge can be tackled with adherence to safety protocols and an aggressive vaccination drive so that the economy, which is on a fragile road to recovery, does not get derailed again. ■

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पिछले कुछ दिनों में घाटी में आतंकी हमलों में तेजी आई है. एक ओर आतंकी सेना को निशाना बना रहे हैं, तो वहीं सेना भी ऑपरेशन चला

BATTLE FOR BENGAL

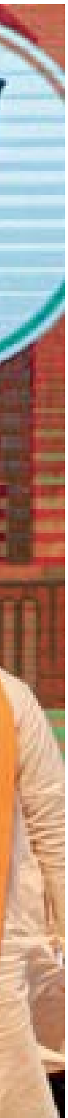
FUMBLING AT THE FINISH LINE

Will internal rift and controversial candidate selections upset the BJP applecart in West Bengal?

By Romita Datta

THE PROMISED LAND
Amit Shah with Kailash Vijayvargiya, Mukul Roy and Dilip Ghosh at the release of the BJP manifesto in Kolkata

DEBAJYOTI CHAKRABORTY



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“Political tourism *bahut achha chal raha hai* (Political tourism is on in full swing).” This jibe from Union home minister Amit Shah, the BJP’s chief strategist for the West Bengal assembly election, on March 15 was directed at the 25-odd party leaders in charge of organisational work, who have been camping in the state for the past three months to realise Mission ‘*Ebar Bangla* (Now Bengal)’. Earlier in the day, Shah had to call off his rally in Jhargram district at the eleventh hour as the BJP local unit was able to mobilise only a handful of people to turn up.

Shah’s dressing down for party leaders, though, was prompted by a deeper concern. Campaigning in Guwahati for the Assam election, he decided on a brief stopover in Bengal on the way back to Delhi following reports of intense disgruntlement among party leaders and workers over the selection of candidates. Between March 14 and 16, BJP workers blockaded highways and vandalised party offices in parts of Howrah, Hooghly and South Dinajpur districts. Leaders, including national vice-president Mukul Roy, national joint general secretary (organisation) Shivprakash and Barrackpur MP Arjun Singh, were mobbed at the party headquarters in Kolkata. For the BJP, which claims to have a disciplined cadre and promises to rid Bengal of the ‘cult of political violence’, the incidents were deeply embarrassing.

While in Kolkata for a night, Shah, it is learnt, questioned several decisions taken in the run-up to the Bengal election. He asked BJP national president J.P. Nadda why last October, a relatively inexperienced Amitava Chakravorty had replaced Subrata Chattopadhyay, an experienced RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) hand, as party general secretary (organisation). Chakravorty, an RSS *pracharak* and former ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad) leader, was promoted from the position of joint general secretary (organisation).

THE TUSSLE WITHIN

Chattopadhyay’s removal came as a huge setback for BJP Bengal unit chief Dilip Ghosh. The two had been working closely for the past four years and had contributed immensely to their party’s impressive growth in the state—from 10 per cent votes and three seats in the 2016 assembly election to over 40 per cent votes and 18 seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha poll. Nadda and Kailash Vijayvargiya, the BJP national general secretary and central observer for Bengal, tried to argue in favour of Chakravorty, but Shah was unimpressed. “What will he (Chakravorty) do?” he asked, bluntly.

Chattopadhyay’s unceremonious exit had indeed raised eyebrows since he is known for his organisational prowess, having set up 1,200 mandals, 11,000 shakti kendras and 66,000 of the BJP’s 78,000 booth committees in Bengal. “His strategy was to make inroads into villages with the help of the RSS’s social work,” says a senior state BJP leader. “He not only groomed grassroots leaders but worked to woo those pathologically inclined against the Trinamool Congress (TMC)—unlike the current crop of leaders who are joining us for vested interests.”

With Ghosh also sidelined, it is Vijayvargiya and Roy who are calling the shots when it comes to selecting the candidates, planning the campaign and briefing the central leaders. “Dilip *da* was not taken into confidence while preparing the list of candidates, so he reserved his opinion when approached by the central leaders,” says another senior BJP leader from Bengal. He squarely blames Roy for Chattopadhyay’s demotion. “Subrata Chattopadhyay used to ensure that the BJP’s doors were not open to anyone and everyone. Roy was unable to mould him and convinced the central leaders that he wouldn’t be able to function freely with a staunch RSS leader.”

COMMOTION OVER CANDIDATES

The BJP’s indiscretion while taking on board leaders from other parties—primarily the TMC—has been more than apparent. The spate of inductions includes many ticket hopefuls who had failed to make the grade in the TMC. The BJP promised to field them as candidates and won them over. Several such questionable candidate choices are now blowing in the party’s face, with open revolt by the local cadre reported in the districts of Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, Howrah, Hooghly, North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas. Of the 294 BJP candidates, 20-25 are facing resistance from within the party. Thirteen of them are TMC imports.

The BJP insists that all its candidates were selected on the basis of an outsourced ‘winnability’ survey. But many in the party doubt the claim. Take, for instance, the controversy surrounding Biswajit Kundu, a TMC turncoat who got the BJP ticket from Kalna in East Burdwan district. In 2014, Kundu had faced accusations of nepotism and irregularities in the recruitment of those who had cleared the Teacher Eligibility Test (TET). Local BJP workers question how the candidate survey could have picked him from among the probables for the Kalna seat.

Sentiments are equally strong against Siddhartha Naskar, the candidate from Nabadwip, an area with heavy Vaishnavite influence. Naskar is accused of malpractices at his ashram in the area, and several religious organisations have

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apparently expressed dismay over his candidature. Naskar, though, has denied these allegations. Local BJP workers are similarly aghast that 89-year-old former TMC leader Rabindranath Bhattacharjee has been fielded from Singur in Hooghly district. Given his age, Bhattacharjee can barely walk without support and there's widespread scepticism about how active he can be even if he wins the election.

Even Hooghly MP Locket Chatterjee's candidature from Chinsurah has not gone down well with the cadre. "What was the need to give a ticket to Locket Chatterjee when Subir Nag was a far credible option? He is an able organiser with an RSS background," says a BJP leader from Chatterjee's Lok Sabha constituency. An upset Nag has distanced himself from the campaign and engrossed himself in organisational work. For the Champdani seat in Hooghly district, the BJP has fielded a businessman, Dilip Singh, whose primary reason for contesting the election is to 'prevent extortion by other political parties'.

Clearly, the candidate survey alibi is doing little to address the resentment in the lower ranks of the BJP. "Had selections been made on the basis of the survey, how come Congress veteran Somen Mitra's wife Shikha Mitra was named the candidate from Kolkata's Chowringhee when she was not even a member of the BJP?" asks a party worker in Kolkata. Shikha Mitra had claimed to have turned down an offer to join the BJP. The party eventually named Debabrata Majhi as its candidate from Chowringhee.

WHILE AMIT SHAH HAS DEPUTED SENIOR LEADERS TO DOUSE THE FIRE, PM MODI USED THE KHARAGPUR RALLY TO PLACATE THE 'SIDELINED' DILIP GHOSH

DAMAGE CONTROL

Rattled by the discontent, Shah has asked senior leaders, such as Vijayvargiya, Shivprakash, Arvind Menon, B.L. Santhosh, Sunil Deodhar and Harish Dwivedi, to reach out and douse the fire. Prime Minister Narendra Modi too has pitched in with the troubleshooting. Sensing the mood in the Ghosh camp over the perceived importance being accorded to TMC inductees at the cost of displeasing old-timers, Modi chose a packed election rally in Kharagpur on March 20 to shower praise on the state BJP chief. In Ghosh's presence, Modi declared: "I am proud that the BJP has a state president like Dilip Ghosh. To ensure our victory, he has not had a peaceful [night] and did not get cowed down by Didi's (Mamata Banerjee) threats either. He has braved several life-threatening attacks." Modi added that the hard work put in by Ghosh had convinced him that the BJP would win the election.

Ghosh won the Kharagpur seat in 2016 by trouncing 11-time Congress MLA Gyan Singh Sohanpal. The prime minister lauding Ghosh when many in the BJP have written him off in the race for chief ministership was perhaps not without purpose. Barely six days ago, the BJP had announced its list of 123 candidates for the first four phases of voting, beginning March 27. Seven of them were TMC turncoats. The number was not significant, but so intense has been the exasperation that it sparked dissension in public by BJP workers.

Clearly, sections in the BJP cadre are unable to reconcile with defectors or 'unworthy' candidates being fielded from their constituencies in place of local leaders who have served the party for long and are popular. Not only is cadre morale down, the BJP faces the prospect of desertions and peeved leaders contesting as Independents to queer the pitch.

Some feel the BJP deliberately denied Ghosh a ticket to maintain suspense over its chief ministerial face, which has several contenders—Babul Supriyo, Swapan Dasgupta and former TMC heavyweight Suvendu Adhikari, to name a few. "The party wanted the campaign to be PM Modi versus Mamata. Giving Dilip *da* a ticket would have pitched him directly against Mamata. Moreover, while it would have enthused the Ghosh camp and some party veterans, it would have also provided ammo to rival power centres," says a BJP general secretary, requesting anonymity.

Among these power centres, the BJP would certainly not like to antagonise Roy, who is already contesting the assembly election (from Krishnanagar North) against his wishes. Roy, who defected to the BJP in November 2017, has never won an election and had cited health reasons to stay out of the race this time as well. But Shah was insistent that he contest. Some in the BJP believe Shah wanted to tie Roy down to one constituency to stop him from meddling around and stoking resentment among BJP old-timers. The BJP central leadership believes Roy would be of immense use if the party fails to sweep the election but is within striking distance of the simple majority mark of 148. "Roy would be required to poach MLAs, so it's but natural that he is being pampered now," says the BJP general secretary.

Despite its high-decibel campaign, publicity blitzkrieg and big-ticket imports from both the TMC and the film and TV fraternity, the BJP, many argue, appears less buoyant than it was six months ago. "The party's image has certainly taken a beating. If the PM and Union home minister have to come down to troubleshoot, it shows that the BJP lacks a state-level leadership to address basic problems," says Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, professor of political science at Calcutta University. The big question: will the crisis in the BJP have a blink-and-go effect on voters who—in Datta Gupta's words—have "made up their minds to vote out the Trinamool", or will the BJP boat capsize just when the party thought it was about to anchor on the shore? ■

PEACEMAKERS PM Narendra Modi with state BJP leaders and Bodo leader Hagrama Mohilary at an event in Kokrajhar to celebrate the signing of the third peace accord, Jan. 27

NARENDRA MODI
on the occasion of
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BATTLE FOR ASSAM

SPLIT IN THE BODO VOTE?

The BPF has a strong presence in Assam's Bodoland Territorial Region, but it might face its toughest competition yet in ally-turned-rival BJP

By Kaushik Deka

Since 2006, one political party, the Bodoland People's Front (BPF), has been a part of every coalition government in Assam. Formed in 2005, it shared power with the Congress between 2006 and 2016. Just before the assembly poll in 2016, it dumped its former ally and joined hands with the BJP. In February this year, the party took a U-turn to be part of the Congress-led 'Mahajath', a pre-poll alliance of eight parties. Though now with the Congress, the BPF's unannounced policy to be part of the power structure at the Centre and in the state makes it the most unpredictable kingmaker in Assam's politics. The party, which has been sweeping the election in the state's Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) for the past three assembly polls, can switch sides, depending on what is up for bargain.

Hence the 12 seats in BTR will likely determine who has the last laugh on May 2, when the results of Assam's 126 assembly seats will be declared. Seen through a demographic prism, the Mahajath seems invincible. The BPF has a strong support base among Bodos, who account for around 30 per cent of BTR's population. The Muslims in the region make up another 15 per cent—by unofficial estimate—and have traditionally backed the Congress and AIUDF. This time, the Congress-led alliance has fielded only BPF candidates in these 12 seats, in a bid to consolidate the vote share of all the three parties.

In the previous two assembly polls, the BPF, on an average, got over 45 per cent of the votes polled in these seats. The combined vote share of the Congress, BPF and AIUDF in the BTR is around 70 per cent. While this looks like the perfect demographic electoral equation to provide the BPF a smooth run in the assembly poll, the party is facing its stiffest challenge ever, primarily because of a split in its core votebank—the Bodos. This split has been engineered by its former ally, the BJP, which was getting wary of the BPF's dominance in the BTR.

The beginning of the rift between the two allies began in February last year when the BJP-led Union government signed the third Bodo Accord. Union home minister Amit Shah described it as "the final and comprehensive solution" to the Bodo problem. For more than half a century, the Bodos, the largest plains tribe in Assam accounting for nearly 6 per cent of the state's population, have been demanding either a separate state or a separate country to protect their ethno-cultural identity. The first Bodo Accord was signed in 1993 between the Centre, the state and the leaders of the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) and Bodo People's Action Committee.

However, this peace was short-lived as extremist groups, such as the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), did not accept the treaty. In 2003, the Union and the state governments signed the second Bodo Accord with the BLT. Four Bodo-dominated adjoining districts were demarcated as Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) to be governed by the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), an autonomous body formed under the 6th Schedule of the Constitution. After this, the BLT cadres gave up armed struggle, formed the BPF and joined mainstream politics.

The third accord signed in the presence of BPF leadership, the ABSU and the four factions of the NDFB, marked the end of insurgency in the region. While providing some additional powers to the BTC, the accord also renamed the BTAD as the BTR. The NDFB gave up its demand for a sovereign country and ABSU its demand for statehood.

Shortly after the signing, Pramod Boro, president of the ABSU, joined the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL), a Bodo-dominated political party formed in 2015. Boro's entry not only rejuvenated the UPPL but also challenged the cult-like following BPF chief Hagrama Mohilary enjoyed. The BJP saw this as an opportunity to strike at the BPF's indispensability and expand its own network in the Bodo areas and, therefore, inched closer to the UPPL. Upset by this development, Mohilary went on record to say that the accord had achieved nothing apart from a change in the nomenclature. What made matters worse was Mohilary's public announcement that he wanted Sarbananda Sonowal to continue as chief minister knowing very well that it would antagonise Himanta Biswa Sarma, finance minister and the BJP's key strategist in the Northeast. It's an open secret that Sarma has his eye on Sonowal's post were the BJP to return to power. To keep the peace, the party has not announced a chief ministerial candidate for Assam yet.

In the run-up to the BTC election in December, the BJP officially ended its alliance with the BPF and joined hands with the UPPL. And though the BPF emerged as the single-largest party, winning 17 of the 40 council seats, the UPPL, which won 12 seats, and the BJP, which bagged nine, formed the executive body in the council, displacing the BPF from power for the first time since 2005. This will be the first assembly election that the BPF will contest without being in power in BTC or in an alliance with either the Centre or the state government. This will also be the first election where the militant avatar of the NDFB will not play a role since all its four groups have surrendered and joined mainstream politics. In fact, this would be the first-ever poll in the state without the shadow of militancy. "We are not involved in the political process and are trying to piece together our lives," says Rosoraj Basumatary, former cadre of the Ranjan Daimary faction of the NDFB. The 34-year-old has taken up farming after receiving a rehabilitation package of Rs 4 lakh as fixed deposit from the govern-

FOR VOTERS IN THE BTR, WHICH HAS LOST NEARLY 4,000 PEOPLE IN THE PAST 30 YEARS, THE PROMISE OF PEACE COULD BE A MAJOR DRAW ment. “It’s our collective responsibility to rehabilitate the cadres so that they can meaningfully merge with society and create an environment for lasting peace in the region,” says Hiren Chandra Nath, IGP, special branch, Assam Police.

The BJP has been quick to claim credit for restoring peace in the region. In public rallies, Shah talked about the development package of Rs 5,000 crore for the BTR, of which Rs 750 crore has already been sanctioned for 65 schemes. For the voters in the region that has lost nearly 4,000 people, including civilians, militant and security personnel, over the past three decades, peace could be a major draw. “It’s good to have an election without an environment of fear, but people will wait to see how long the peace lasts as it has often eluded us in the past,” says Pushpadhar Das, an IIM alumnus-turned-farmer from the BTR’s Baksa district.

Despite reduced influence and emerging challenges, the BPF expects to capitalise on the demographic construct in the region. The combined might of the BJP and UPPL could make the BPF shed only three seats from its previous tally of 20. This happened because a large chunk of Muslim population, earlier opposed to the BPF, voted for the Bodo party instead of the Congress and AIUDF, because it was seen as best suited to prevent the BJP from coming to power. This has given Mohilary the confidence to repeatedly claim that the BPF will retain all 12 seats. It is an interesting development in the region which has seen several ethnic clashes between Bodos and Muslims of immigrant origin in the past two decades, with nearly 100 casualties in 2012. “The Muslims are unlikely to support the BJP or its allies. That makes the BPF their only option,” says Gayotri Dekadoloi, who teaches political science at the Bodoland University in Kokrajhar.

Sarma, however, dismisses this demographic arithmetic and asserts that the BJP-UPPL alliance will sweep the polls. What adds to the strength of this alliance is the addition of Gana Suraksha Party (GSP) led by Naba Sarania, who represents Kokrajhar, the only Lok Sabha constituency from the BTR. In the past two consecutive general elections, Sarania has defeated the BPF candidate, thanks mainly to the non-Bodo votes in the region. In this assembly poll, Sarania is contesting from Barama constituency. “The votes of the BJP, UPPL and GSP combined will ensure absolute majority for us in the Bodoland region,” says Boro.

Apart from the Bodos and Muslims, the other population groups in the BTR include Assamese, Bengalis, Koch Rajbongshis, Adivasis, Rabhas and Nepalis. While the Muslims may back the BPF, the other communities, who resent the Bodo supremacy in the region, may veer towards the BJP-UPPL alliance as they see the BJP as a party that can protect their interests. Besides, the Muslim population is concentrated in certain specific pockets, restricting their influence. “It will be a keen contest. The UPPL has a wider acceptance among the educated and progressive Bodo population. The other communities, except Muslims, may move towards the UPPL-BJP if they feel this alliance has winning potential,” says Dekadoloi. Irrespective of the results, the outcome will certainly play a role in deciding who grabs power in Dispur on May 2. ■

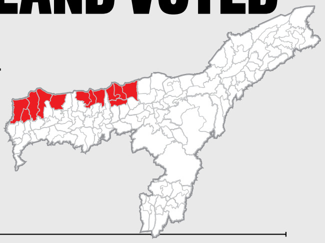
WHAT IS THE BTR?

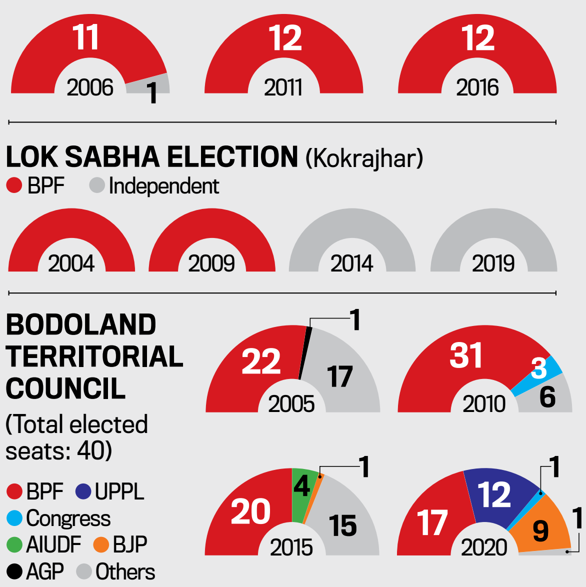
The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) is an autonomous region created under the 6th Schedule of the Constitution to provide self-rule to the Bodo people in four adjoining districts–Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri–in western Assam. The 6th Schedule allows for political autonomy and decentralised governance in certain tribal areas of the Northeast. The Bodos, a plains-dwelling tribe, are the single-largest ST community in Assam, accounting for nearly 6 per cent of its population.

Several Bodo groups have led armed struggles, demanding either a separate state or country for Bodos. Three accords–in 1993, 2003 and 2020–have been signed among the Centre, state and the Bodo groups to bring an end to the insurgency in the region. Following the 2003 accord, the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was created to administer the four districts then known as the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts, covering an area of over 2,7000 sq. km, or 35 per cent of Assam’s total area. In January 2020, all militant groups gave up their armed struggle and joined the mainstream. The BTAD was rechristened the BTR. A committee is examining the process to redraw the boundaries of the BTR as some non-Bodo areas have been included in the region while some Bodo-dominated villages were left out. Currently, Bodos account for 27 per cent of the BTR’s population. The other communities in the region include Assamese, Bengali, Koch-Rajbongshi, Rabha, Garo, Adivasi, Muslim and Nepali.

HOW BODOLAND VOTED

Since 2006, when the first assembly poll was held after the formation of the BTC*, the BPF has dominated elections. This time, the Bodo party faces its biggest challenge ever in BTR.





*Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) is responsible for administration of the BTR formed under the 6th Schedule of the Constitution

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

BATTLE FOR KERALA

CAN THE GANDHIS SAVE THE CONGRESS?

While some believe the party could yet emerge the dark horse, others feel it has nothing much to offer its cadre or voters

By Jeemon Jacob

IN the upcoming Kerala assembly election, scheduled for April 6, the Congress appears to be locked in a battle for survival. Though the party has fielded 55 new candidates and pressed the Pinarayi Vijayan-led LDF (Left Democratic Front) government on multiple issues, observers say it has only just managed to fight its way back from ruin.

Recently, responding to a complaint filed by the Congress, the Election Commission ordered the state government to halt the distribution of food kits until polling has been concluded. Though this comes late in the day, it may limit how much public goodwill the LDF carries to the polls through this distribution of state resources. On a similar note, the Congress has been making much of a now-cancelled deal valued at several thousand crores between the Kerala Inland Navigation Corporation and EMCC International to develop a major corporate fishing unit which may have violated the state's fishing policy and could have put the livelihoods of independent fishermen at risk. The party has also brought in its big guns—Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi, as well as senior leader A.K. Antony—to target the LDF.

"I would say the Congress has a 50-50 chance at the polls," says Sunnikutty Abraham, a political analyst who has closely monitored the party over the past four decades. "It has intelligently positioned itself to defend against the LDF. The Gandhis, with their impressive showing, have helped the Congress-led UDF (United Democratic Front) to re-emerge [as a credible contender] and [the alliance] may scrape through by fashioning a victory similar to 2011 in which the Congress-led alliance won with 72 of the 140 assembly seats."

In Kerala, the Congress has been in virtual political exile since the 2016 assembly election, and the party appears to have been banking on the state's tradition of switching governments every five years, though this may prove a bad bet. "None of the recent poll surveys favour the Congress," says N.P. Rajendran, a senior journalist based in Kozhikode who is a keen observer of the state's politics. "If they win, it would be a [major political upset]. But how can they win without a decent showing in northern Kerala? I am betting on the LDF returning to power with over 75 seats," he says. He points to the fact that the Congress has a very weak base in the north of the state, and that it is depending on the IUML (Indian Union Muslim League) to bolster its position, adding that the Congress has been struggling with funding and is finding it difficult to compete with LDF and NDA opponents.

THROW OF THE DICE
Rahul Gandhi campaigning in Kerala's Kottayam district

Knowing well that a major defeat in Kerala could have serious long-term consequences, the Congress has been banking on the Gandhi family name to reverse the political tide. Nonetheless, poll surveys across the board predict the party getting a maximum of 37.5 per cent of the total vote. To win, it will need at least five percentage points more than that.

However, others are more hopeful. Paul Zacharia, noted Malyalam writer, says that the CPI(M) would be making a major mistake to underestimate the Gandhi factor. "The Gandhis could corner [substantial] votes for the Congress," he says. "In the 2019 Lok Sabha poll, Rahul Gandhi was a major draw for minority voters. They are attempting a similar strategy, with Priyanka Gandhi campaigning for the Congress. I feel that the Gandhis could still influence Kerala's voters with their popularity." Saying that the people of Kerala still feel great loyalty to the Congress's first family, he adds: "It may be that they [no longer] have relevance in the Hindi belt. In Kerala, they still have a votebank among women and young people." It is certainly true that the Congress has been doing its best to exploit the Gandhi factor, parading them even in constituencies where it has no chance of winning.

For the upcoming poll, the Congress faces five major challenges. The first is that the party doesn't have a clear leader like the CPI(M)'s Pinarayi Vijayan. Second, many say that the Congress has been playing as the BJP's 'B-team' for several years now. Thirdly, the party was nowhere to be seen on the political stage through the Covid-19 pandemic. The fourth and fifth factors are related: lacking a major poll plank or larger political strategy, the party has failed to generate hope for its cadre in Kerala and convince them that the party has a future.

"If the party looks beyond its borders, it could have a bright future in Kerala," says K.T. Benny, a Congress youth leader who contested the polls but lost in 2011. "We need to improve our work at the ground level and organise the party better. But its current exercise disappointed me as it showed that there is no collective leadership." He does bank on Rahul Gandhi's personal appeal to rescue the party.

Karthikeyan Devadas, a voter from Paravur, says that the Congress will have to reinvent itself and develop a new political dynamic to attract voters. "We are a generation who have hated the Congress for the Emergency," he says. "We have never pardoned their past misdeeds. In Kerala, the Left is the only hope. They have proved it when we were in distress. The Congress has always tried to block development or throttle the poor as it is driven by its own agenda." This reveals another stern challenge facing the Congress-led UDF in Kerala—poor credibility.

However, history is full of stories in which defenders have emerged victorious. In defence-led strategies, a common tactic is to lead an opponent into a strategic blunder that can be exploited. The Congress could find a similar strategy useful in Kerala—if the LDF is bogged down in the Sabrimala issue, the Gandhi family name may prove enough to see it through to the finish. ■

POLL SURVEYS ACROSS THE BOARD SHOW THE CONGRESS GETTING A MAXIMUM OF 37.5 PER CENT OF THE VOTE. TO WIN, IT WILL NEED AT LEAST FIVE PERCENTAGE POINTS MORE

BATTLE FOR TAMIL NADU

DESPERATE GAMBIT

The AIADMK is banking on its development agenda and tall poll promises while relying on its allies to malign the DMK to win a third consecutive term

By Amarnath K. Menon

In the upcoming April 6 Tamil Nadu assembly election, Chief Minister E.K. Palaniswami is faced with a somewhat Herculean task—winning a third consecutive term for the All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). Achieving this will match the record of party founder M.G. Ramachandran, the actor-turned-politician whose radiating charisma and zeal for people's welfare won his party the assembly polls in 1977, 1980 and 1984. The party currently holds 124 seats in the 235-member house. The chief minister's poll strategy has focused on promoting the AIADMK's achievements in the past decade while relying on his allies, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), to target the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). In early March, the AIADMK signed a pact with the BJP, assigning it 20 seats for the assembly election.

Since December 19 last year, the chief minister has been campaigning tirelessly—as of March 23, he had addressed over 200 meetings, rallies and roadshows, covering more than 100 of the state's 234 constituencies, beginning with his native Edappadi in Salem district. He has taken pains to present himself as a doer, highlighting initiatives such as farm loan waivers for 1.64 million farmers, Rs 1,300 crore spent on the Kudimaramathu scheme for improved water management, Rs 2,247 crore in relief payments to farmers affected by natural disasters and Rs 9,300 crore disbursed to farmers through the state's crop insurance scheme. The AIADMK's poll promises include land and houses for landless farmers, higher education scholarships for Scheduled Caste families, six free cooking gas cylinders per household per year, loan waivers for women's self-help groups and an increase in Haj travel subsidies, among others. The party has also been making somewhat unbelievable promises—on March 21, campaigning in Tiruvannamalai's Arani constituency, the chief minister announced that a new district would be created, headquartered at Arani. On March 24, he announced that another new district would be created, with Palani as itss headquarters. This is despite the fact that Tamil Nadu's 13 original districts have already been carved up into a total of 38 so far.

The AIADMK's allies have also been making tall promises. The BJP has promised to create 5 million new jobs and bring back total prohibition—a ban on the open sale and consumption of liquor. It has also ramped up attacks on the DMK, publishing a booklet of '100 reasons to reject the DMK'. These include accusations of 'anti-national activity', pointing out that in 2018, DMK chief M.K. Stalin had said that he would welcome a situation in which India's southern states came together to demand the creation of 'Dravida Nadu'. Describing this as a secessionist demand, the BJP has also targeted the DMK for opposing the abrogation of Article

JAISON G

PROMISING THE EARTH
Tamil Nadu chief minister
E.K. Palaniswami at a rally in Madurai

370 in Jammu and Kashmir and said that a video released by Stalin's son and DMK youth wing leader Udhayanidhi contained a map of India that did not show Pakistan-occupied Kashmir as part of Indian territory. The saffron party has also accused the DMK of being against development in the state, citing its opposition to the Chennai-Salem expressway project. (However, the PMK, part of the AIADMK alliance, has also opposed this project.) For its part, the PMK has also been combative. "[A third term for] the AIADMK will ensure democracy, while DMK rule would be a monarchy," says PMK youth leader Anbumani Ramadoss. "This is the case not only with [state level] leadership, but in every district."

A question that many ask is if these efforts will be enough to address anti-incumbency. Alliance partners do not think it will be a problem. G.K. Vasan, chief of the Tamil Maanila Congress (Moopanar), says, "Even after 10 years in power, anti-incumbency against the AIADMK is quite low. [The benefits] of welfare schemes and development projects have reached the people." Others say the AIADMK will have its hands full dealing with this problem, especially in the roughly 30 constituencies where it is contesting against both the DMK and the T.T.V. Dhinakaran-led breakaway faction, the AMMK (Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam). They also point to the polarisation within the AIADMK as another factor the chief minister must grapple with. Ramu Manivannan, head of the department of politics and public administration at the University of Madras, says, "More than the perception of the DMK as 'the enemy', the real challenges for the chief minister are V.K. Sasikala, Dhinakaran and O. Panneerselvam, who he can neither ignore nor acknowledge [as opponents]. His only hope is to buy votes, play up public fears about the DMK coming to power and hope that the BJP's political-institutional manoeuvres [will do the job]."

On this last point, there is one more problem—the AIADMK and the BJP are not on the same page on the controversial CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act). While the AIADMK had initially voted for it in Parliament, the party's poll manifesto, released in mid-March, says that it will press the Centre to scrap the law, a point that chief minister Palaniswami reiterated after filing his nomination papers. In response, the BJP's state IT chief, C.T.R. Nirmal Kumar, was reported as saying, "Knowing the Centre's stand on [the CAA], AIADMK leadership should not [bring this up]—it is an embarrassment to us."

The intensity of the poll battle appears to have led several senior AIADMK ministers like D. Jayakumar, S.P. Velumani, K.A. Sengottaiyan, K.T. Rajenthra Bhalaji and R.B. Udhayakumar to confine their poll outreach to the constituencies they are contesting from. This is uncharacteristic of leaders who also hold party posts as district secretaries—Bhalaji, for instance, has been seen only doing the rounds in Rajapalayam, where he is contesting, without stepping into Sivakasi constituency, where he is the sitting MLA. Only Chief Minister Palaniswami and Deputy Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam have been seen campaigning in districts across the state. In several constituencies, AIADMK cadre have also been reluctant to campaign alongside BJP activists, and in constituencies where the BJP is contesting, AIADMK cadre have been staying away. Analysts point out that this is a hurdle to the potential transfer of votes between the AIADMK and its allies.

Political commentator N. Sathiya Moorthy says, "Even if the AIADMK wins, it will face serious challenges. Similar to the experience of Nitish Kumar in Bihar, the chief minister will have to manage the BJP deftly, without losing his party's vote base and his own clout in state affairs. On the administrative front, he will have to find ways to raise huge funds to make good on his poll promises, in the face of mounting state debt, which now stands at Rs 5 lakh crore, against the Rs 1 lakh crore when his party came to power in 2011." ■

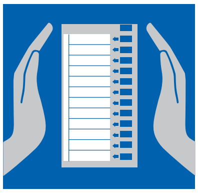
THE AIADMK HAS BEEN PROMISING TO CREATE NEW DISTRICTS, DESPITE THE FACT THAT TAMIL NADU'S 13 ORIGINAL DISTRICTS HAVE ALREADY BEEN CARVED INTO 38

GAME'S ON...

As election season dawns, political parties crank up the gears, with fast and furious campaigning, promises galore, and waxing-waning alliances

WEST BENGAL

NON-STOP SOPS



There appears to be no end to the promises being made to voters in Bengal. Aside from poll pledges, Trinamool Congress (TMC) chief **Mamata Banerjee** has been promising rewards to those willing to protect EVMs (electronic voting machines) against tampering. Alleging that BJP leaders are using money and threats to get votes, she has also promised jobs to those who prevent this from happening. "Look out for outsiders and *gundas* coming into your communities with cash to lure voters," she has said at poll rallies. "Hand them over to us. We will reward you." The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is not far behind—among other pledges, Union home minister Amit Shah has promised five-rupee meals for the tribals of West Midnapore, Purulia and Bankura, as well as a museum for tribal leader Birsa Munda.

STEALING THE SHOW

Mithun Chakraborty has proved a massive draw at the BJP's events. At a rally for Chandana Bauri in Bankura's Saltora, Chakraborty's chopper was forced to circle for several minutes because of the enormous crowd. When he landed, he delivered a favourite line from one of his films–"*Marbo ekhane, laash porbe shoshane* (I will hit you here, and your corpse will arrive directly at the crematorium)"–leading to a surge of fans crowding his vehicle and demanding more. He had to frequently remind the crowd that the event was for Bauri, not him.

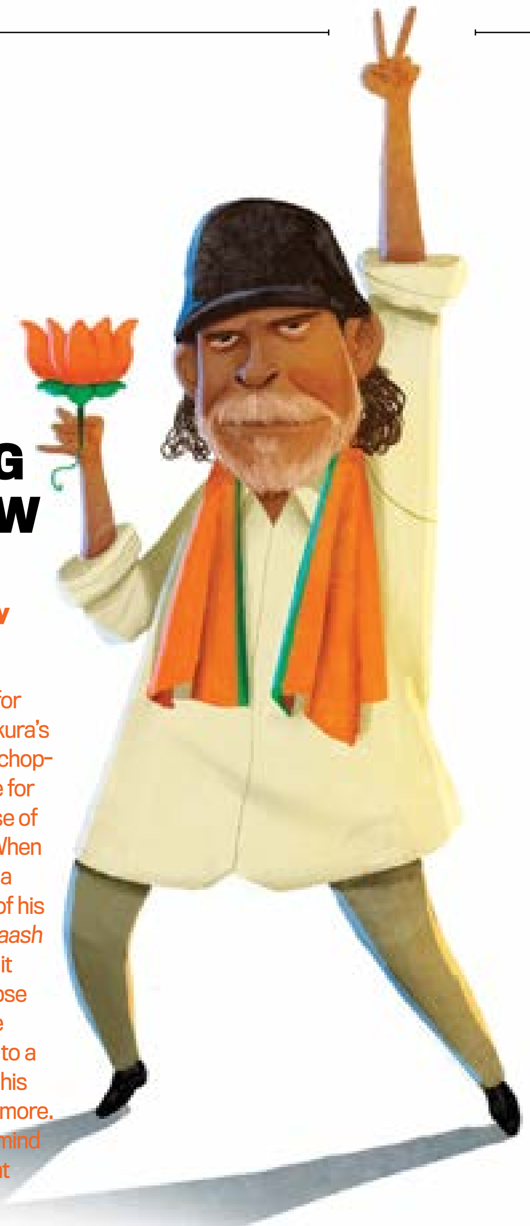


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

Notes from Nandigram

Despite the bitter struggle between Mamata and Suvendu Adhikari, the TMC campaign in Nandigram is being run out of a house owned by Adhikari's election agent. Part of the building had been leased to the TMC before Adhikari left for the BJP, and the situation has continued since. The Left has been quick to say that this confirms their suspicion that the TMC and BJP are working hand-in-glove behind the scenes.

■ The TMC's **Abhishek Banerjee** has a new name for Adhikari: "*Chaar sau bees* (420)" Adhikari. Noting that Adhikari has frequently described voters in numbers–"We have the support of 260,000 [Hindus], I am not concerned with 62,000 [Muslims]"–Banerjee seems to have thought it fit to give Adhikari a 'number plate' of his own.

SUBIR HALDER

■ Toward the end of campaigning, Mamata sparked off speculation about taking political *sanyaas* when she said she would 'stay in a mud hut near the river Haldi' once the government was formed. As it turned out, she meant that if the TMC returned to power, she would maintain a home in Nandigram with a parallel CMO (chief minister's office), similar to the set-up she has at Kalighat.

TAMIL NADU

TIGER BALM

Beyond the usual pantheon of Dravidian icons, another symbol of Tamil pride is LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) chief **V. Prabhakaran**. Several parties have been using his image to enthuse voters for the upcoming election, including the nationalist NTK (Naam Tamilar Katchi), Vaiko's MDMK (Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), the PMK (Pattali Makkal Katchi) and Thol Thirumavalavan's VCK (Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi). "Prabhakaran remains relevant in the state's political landscape because of his appeal among the youth," says Ramu Manivannan, head of the department of politics and public administration at the University of Madras. "Political parties are also using his image to show their solidarity with Eelam Tamil issues."

PAL PILLAI/ GETTY IMAGES

KERALA

OFF THE HOOK

A recent report by the Kerala Crime Branch, which investigated the 2013 multi-crore solar panel scam, said it was unable to find evidence to charge former CM Oommen Chandy. This came as a major relief to Chandy, who is contesting the poll from Puthuppally, which he has represented for over half a century. However, other leaders, including AICC (All India Congress Committee) general secretary K.C. Venugopal, the BJP's A.P. Abdullakutty and Congress MPs Hibi Eden and Adoor Prakash remain on the hook, with the agency yet to complete its investigation.

JOHNEY THOMAS

ASSAM

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

Manaranjan Brahma, a 43-year-old businessman and debutant candidate for the Assam assembly election, has created waves with his financial disclosure. Contesting from Kokrajhar-West, he is the richest-ever candidate in the history of the state's assembly elections with over Rs 268 crore. What has raised many eyebrows is that the UPPL (United People's Party Liberal) chief has 189 bank accounts. He also has two criminal cases against him, including one of cheating.

Men at Odds?

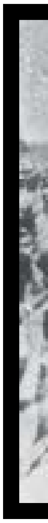
While Assam chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal and finance minister Himanta Biswa Sarma have displayed camaraderie in public, they have recently begun contradicting each other. On the question of who will be the next chief minister, Sonowal said the parliamentary board would take the decision, but Sarma said Prime Minister Narendra Modi and home minister Amit Shah will do the honours. In fact, Sarma has been taking many unilateral actions, even if they go against state government directives. Recently, when confronted by reporters about his massive rallies despite the government asking people to take extra precautions in the wake of rising Covid cases, he retorted: "Where is corona in Assam?"

MANASH DAS

–By Romita Datta, Kaushik Deka, Amarnath K. Menon and Jeemon Jacob

A HALF CENTURY IN THE MAKING

In their new book *1971: The Beginning of India's Cricketing Greatness*, due out this month, **Boria Majumdar** and **Gautam Bhattacharya** celebrate an epochal shift in India's evolution into a cricketing superpower. The year 1971, when the Indian cricket team recorded back-to-back overseas series victories in West Indies and England, marked the beginning, the authors argue, of Indian cricket's 'we can do it' self-belief. Edited excerpts:



After losing to the hosts in Adelaide in the first Test of the 2020-21 tour of Australia, having been bowled out for 36 on the morning of 19 December 2020, India held a team meeting around midnight. "We were determined to get past that one bad hour and a lot of ideas were on the table," recalls Ajinkya Rahane, who'd taken over the captaincy from Virat Kohli in the most challenging circumstances. "That's when Ravi*bhai* [Shastri] said we could think of 36 as a badge. Would it be a badge of disgrace or a badge of honour? That was for us... the beginning of the turnaround."

These recollections of Rahane, the stand-in captain for three of the four Tests on that tour, which India capped off with an epic come-from-behind 2-1 victory, reminded us of the team meeting on the 1971 tour of the Caribbean in captain Ajit Wadekar's room. It was at this meeting that the mercurial Salim Durani declared to the whole team that he would get the wickets of Sir Garfield Sobers and Sir Clive Lloyd the next day. He eventually did achieve what he had set out to do, helping script a historic Indian win in Trinidad. Those two wickets, hugely important in the circumstances, were badges of honour Durani wore all his life thereafter.

In many ways, the trail of India's series triumphs overseas that began in the West Indies in February–March 1971, entered a new phase later that year with the series-clinching win against England at the Oval, and came a full circle with the victory against Australia in the series decider at the Gabba, in Brisbane, in January 2021. Prior to 1971 and 2021, India had never won at the Oval or the Gabba. The similarities don't end there, though.

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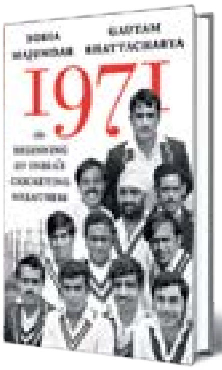
From the Oval to the Gabba, separated by half a century, Indian men's cricket journeyed from one epochal phase to another. Wadekar and his team were the first to walk this path of glory before Kohli and Rahane's troops left their imprint on this historic trail. The twin series wins in 1971 and the triumph on the 2020-21 tour of Australia make for two of India's greatest ever shows of dominance, not least two of their greatest underdog stories of all time.

When Wadekar and his men won in England, a lot was said of their feat. What assumed greater pertinence over the years, though, was all that was left unsaid at the time... The break with royalty and the Raj hangover was complete. It was as though a new India was speaking to the world. Fast forward to Brisbane. In Rishabh Pant was manifested a custodian of a new India, who would be speaking the same language as his predecessors from the twin series wins of 1971, perhaps only louder and more fearlessly.



1971
The Beginning of India's Cricketing Greatness
by Boria Majumdar & Gautam Bhattacharya
HARPERSPORT INDIA
Price: **Rs 479**
Pages: **304**

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The moment that actually completed the transformation, though, happened after the [2020-21 Australia] series had been decided. During India's victory lap, Mohammed Siraj, the Hyderabad pacer who had lost his father, an auto driver, a month earlier while he was on national duty in Australia, was handed the tricolour as he led the victorious team's march along the boundary rope. The scene was emblematic of a united India proud of its diversity. Siraj, a 26-year-old Muslim man, metamorphosed into the torchbearer of a re-

INTIMATIONS OF GREATNESS (Top to bottom) The 1971 Indian cricket team returning from the West Indies; Gavaskar in action at Trinidad; Captain Ajit Wadekar at the victory parade in Bombay; Dilip Sardesai in 1971

silient India that stands shoulder to shoulder to meet—and overcome—adversity head-on. Leading his colleagues, Siraj gave a wordless reply to the spectators who had hurled racist insults at him and his teammate Jasprit Bumrah during the third Test at the SCG. He was also underlining that cricket—and sport at large—remains one of the most powerful unifying forces, a supreme leveller, and that the game doesn't distinguish between a Hindu and a Muslim, the rich and the poor...

The parade in Bombay, organised for Wadekar and his men upon their return from India's first-ever series win in England, commemorated Indian cricket's ability to break through class and power hierarchies. Wadekar had worked hard on helping align Indian cricket with meritocracy and, in the 50 years since he first excelled overseas as captain, his legacy helped give birth to more success stories in the sport.

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If India today look like the team to beat, it's hard to pinpoint just one important reason for their supremacy. An abundance of raw talent and bench strength explain the dominance only in part. Likewise early strategic planning and institutionalised processes for the discovery of talent. Well-timed exposure for national prospects, robust infrastructure at the grassroots and sizeable professional rewards, too, tell only a part of the story. There's no denying that these factors play a role in shaping outcomes, but the work ethic and professionalism of the current team also warrant counting. This is perhaps the only difference between 1971 and 2021. In time, the benefits of '71 were lost and India plummeted to an ignominious 42 all out the next time they toured England, in 1974. Player unity suffered and some of those cracks remain conspicuous to this day. The standout feature of the 2021 team, however, was their ability to move on quickly—be it from the most crushing disappointment (the Adelaide defeat) or fairytale success (the Brisbane victory)—to the next assignment. England visited India soon after the epic Brisbane victory on a twelve-match tour, kicked off by a four-Test series that got under way on 5 February, less than three weeks after the Brisbane Test ended. It was a match that India would go on to lose, but the second Test, also played in Chennai, saw a comprehensive Indian victory. Indian cricket fans the world over may have wished to linger over the triumph Down Under for longer, but Team India had moved on. 'Just as we moved on from the 36 all out, it was important to move on from the series victory as well. That's now history,' said Bharat Arun matter-of-factly.

In closing, we must acknowledge [yet another] common chord between India's victorious overseas exploits in 1971 and 2020-21. This involves the central actor in the drama in 1971, who, scoring a record 774 runs at an average of 154 in his debut series in the Caribbean, gave Indian cricket teeth and muscle. In 2021, he was there again, on the tour of Australia, [albeit] in a different capacity, braving the pandemic and a 14-day hard quarantine. The only Indian commentator Down Under describing the exploits of Rahane and his men, it was fitting that Sunil Gavaskar would witness from close quarters a young Indian team script a historic 2-1 Test series victory and lift a trophy that takes half its name from him. On 19 January, as the 2020-21 Border–Gavaskar Trophy came to a formal close, Indian cricket had well and truly come full circle. ■

INDIA TODAY MAGAZINE ROUND TABLE WATER

A WATERSHED SUMMIT

On World Water Day, a virtual round table session organised by *India Today* brought together some of the best minds working to resolve the daunting water crisis facing India

By RAHUL NORONHA

TAPPING IN Residents of Rajasthan's Jalore district crowd around a community tap

W

"Water is the world's most replenishable substance," said Sunita Narain, kicking off the India Today Water Round Table on a positive note. "It is not necessary that India will face water shortages or a water war," added the director general of Centre for Science and Environment.

Moderated by Raj Chengappa, Group Editorial Director (Publishing) at the India Today Group, the virtual session had on its panel experts like Narain working in the field of water conservation. The session was held on March 22, observed as World Water Day. It also explored innovations and tech-based solutions which can be utilised to address India's water crisis.

Harvesting and utilising every drop of rain water India receives was something every speaker stressed on. "Every roof in India needs to be a catchment area. Every drain needs to be worshipped and every tank and pond has to become a temple," said Narain.

According to Arumugam Kalimuthu, programme director, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Institute, the decreasing water table level is a major concern. "As per the water resources ministry, in 1955, the fresh water availability in India was 52 lakh litre per person per annum. This had come down to 22 lakh litres by 2000," he said. As a result, the country looked to ground water for its needs, but the presence of fluoride and arsenic has made ground water potentially dangerous. The variation in rainfall over the past 10 years, though, adds Kalimuthu, has not been significant. Thus, the answer to India's water woes lies in water harvesting and conservation.

According to Narain, the big challenge comes from urban India since cities use clean water and give back waste. And, as India industrialises further, more water will be needed for this sector. To combat this, Narain advocated a shift in the way water supply is managed in urban areas, especially in the treatment of sewage and waste water. "What makes me feel good, though, is that over the past few years, governments, both at the Centre and state levels, have come to recognise the need to make changes in our strategy for water management," she said.

Amit Chandra, managing director and chairman, Bain Capital India, believes the country's approach to water needs to be based on "common sense". "India has 4 per cent of the

BANDEEP SINGH

SUNITA NARAIN
Director General, Centre for Science and Environment

“One issue that needs to be put on the table is pollution. In spite of many efforts, we are unable to deal with the scale of the problem. We need to reinvent our sewage and sanitation systems. We focus on farmers and ground water, but we don’t have data on how much water our cities consume and how they degrade water. The huge task of fecal sludge management through septic tanks is the key”

“The biggest priority is to educate and create awareness among stakeholders—be it gram panchayat members or health workers who test water. We also need to skill electricians, pump operators and masons to run operations and maintenance at the village level. This would help in developing responsible and responsive leadership at the village leadership level”

BHARAT LAL
Addtl. Secretary, Jal Shakti Ministry & Mission Director, Jal Jeevan Mission

“Rather than spending money on treating water, we should spend on preventing pollution”

ARUMUGAM KALIMUTHU

Programme Director, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Institute

“While the focus has been on drip irrigation, adopting the right agronomic practices and focusing on soil moisture can save up to 30 per cent water”

APOORVA AJAY OZA

CEO, Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India)

AMIT CHANDRA

Managing Director & Chairperson, Bain Capital India

“Water needs to be respected. If you do, you will use it appropriately. I’m happy the government has set up a Jal Shakti ministry. We are putting the onus on the farmers, but we ourselves need to understand the consequences of using rice or sugarcane excessively. An important statistic released last year was that not investing in water cost us six per cent of our GDP. This is an opportunity. We could unleash a lot of our economic potential”

DIVYANG WAGHELA

Head, Tata Water Mission

“We need to create water champions at all levels. If we consider 6 lakh villages and 17 lakh habitations, creating social capital on the ground will sustain the process of water management. In the urban context, less than 1 per cent of water is being reused. Infrastructure, technology and decentralised solutions need to be looked into for treating water for reuse over the next few years in urban areas”

world’s fresh water and 16 per cent of the world’s population...our water usage has to be sensible,” he said.

The Centre and state have been stepping up their conservation efforts too. According to Bharat Lal, additional secretary, Jal Shakti ministry, and mission director, Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), the Union government’s flagship programme is different from the programmes of the past. “The JJM’s focus is on functionality of tap water—to provide adequate, clean and regular supply,” Lal said. “Use of technology is a major feature of the JJM.” As per Lal, when JJM was launched, 32.3 million of the 191 million rural households had tap water connections. Within 15 months, JJM had ensured there was a tap water connection in 31 million additional households. The water for these connections is being provided for using treated and grey water to reduce the stress on fresh water sources.

Apoorva Ajay Oza, CEO, Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India), listed four reasons behind the success of programmes such as the JJM. “Decentralisation in decision-making processes helps the community take responsibility and enter mutually respectful partnerships with professionals. Technology for monitoring and scaling up and setting up special purpose vehicles is crucial,” he said.

Using technology as a conservation tool was something Divyang Waghela, head, Tata Water Mission, also stressed on. It helps communities understand and plan their own consumption patterns, he said, adding that farmers should be encouraged to adopt low-cost tech innovations as well. “Unless there is data, issues of wastage cannot be addressed,” he said. ■

To watch the round table session, visit https://bit.ly/31Av53D

LEIS E

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THOMAS ZACHARIAS is committed to popularising regional Indian food

FOOD

THOMAS' INDIAN TAKEAWAY

As he scours the country for its regional cuisines, **Thomas Zacharias** is proving that there is a life for leading chefs beyond restaurant kitchens

ACTING EAST Thomas Zacharias cooking at the Hakoneyama Festival in Japan

If you have an interest in food and are on Instagram, it's likely you are already following chef Thomas Zacharias. The former executive chef of The Bombay Canteen in Mumbai has the kind of feed that will first make you salivate and then want to cook. It might also make you want to hit the road. When travelling through India to discover ingredients and recipes in its nooks and crannies, Zacharias uses the hashtag #ChefOnTheRoad. His recent posts from Uttarakhand also prove he is as fond of people as he is of food. The chef clearly likes his journeys. His own—from working in European restaurants to championing regional Indian cuisine—has been both rewarding and eventful.

Growing up in a food-loving family in Kochi, Zacharias says his grandmother played an important role in shaping his relationship with food: "Ammamma had an almost otherworldly skill of transforming people's moods through her food." After completing a hotel management degree from Manipal Academy in 2007, Zacharias took a course at The Culinary Institute of America in New York and then worked for a year at Le Bernardin, Chef Eric Ripert's three-Michelin starred restaurant. "Despite a visa offer from the restaurant, I decided to return to India because I was bullied in the kitchen. It was not reflective of the entire kitchen, of course; it was just one guy, and, honestly, I didn't stand up for myself either," he says.

It was at Olive Mumbai that Zacharias found his feet as a sous chef. After three years, on a four-month trip around Europe, he had an epiphany. "At Osteria Francescana, chef Massimo Bottura was telling me how his grandmother inspired him and how he was celebrating his regional cuisine. It struck me that here I am spending all my life's savings learning about European food when I have this incredible cuisine heritage back home that I haven't explored," he says. Zacharias returned restless. Providentially, chef Floyd Cardoz was hunting for a head chef for a modern Indian restaurant he was opening with entrepreneurs Sameer Seth and Yash Bhanage around the same time.

Zacharias threw his hat in the ring. Despite not having cooked Indian food professionally, he impressed the trio with an 11-course meal. "I remember a Skype call with Chef Floyd when he asked me 'what would you want as your final meal?' I said, 'My grandmother's duck curry.' He always said that was one of the reasons he hired me," says Zacharias. The Bombay Canteen opened in February 2015 and changed the face of modern Indian dining. Zacharias had a big role to play in both the restaurant's menu and its success. He remembers going on several road trips then, too, diving deeper into regional cuisines, from Kashmir to Tamil Nadu, and from Gujarat to the Northeast.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought everything to a shuddering halt. "Losing chef Floyd took the hardest toll; he was a father figure and it was so unexpected," says Zacharias. (Cardoz died of Covid in New York in March

ON THE NIGHT OF FLOYD CARDOZ'S PASSING, THOMAS ZACHARIAS COOKED FOR HIMSELF—A CHORIZ AND BEAN STEW—TO HONOUR HIS MEMORY

2020.) Finding it hard to cope, Zacharias went off social media for two weeks and made an effort to reconnect with cooking. “I could never cook for myself, but the night of Floyd’s passing, I made a choriz and bean stew as a way to honour him,” he says.

Realising that many people were beginning to cook for themselves during the lockdown, he started a ‘#CookingWithTZac’ video series on Instagram. “I have always felt recipe videos are too manicured and scripted. I wanted to show that even a professional chef might make mistakes and that is okay. There was an engaged audience who wanted to learn recipes and I realised that I could continue spreading my vision of getting people excited about regional Indian food,” he says.

After nearly six years of helming the kitchen, the news in mid-December 2020 of Zacharias moving on from The Bombay Canteen surprised many. “It was something that was on my mind for a couple of years. I didn’t want to remain a chef in a kitchen my entire life but wanted to explore what else I was capable of doing. I call it a mid-life existential choice,” explains Zacharias. Lately, he has been spending time with his family, something that had been on the backburner. “I have a few ideas (for the future) but it’s too early to talk about anything. Whatever I do next will be an extension of my work in celebrating Indian food culture, but it is unlikely to take the shape of a restaurant,” he says. ■

–Prachi Joshi

God’s Own Country Cooking

When mixed together, the outdoors, Kerala and food make for the perfect YouTube recipe

In a video titled ‘Simple Kerala Style Chicken Fry’, uploaded on YouTube channel ‘Village Cooking - Kerala’, the sound of heavy rain mingles with the sizzle of chicken cooking in a heady spice mix of coriander, red chilli and pepper. In the videos, shot in Pothupara in Kerala’s Pathanamthitta district, birds chirp away as 66-year-old Omana *amma* expertly crushes whole spices on an *ammikallu* and cooks on a wood-fired stove.

In Palakkad, brothers Sebin and Ebin P.K. shoot videos atop a hill overlooking the Mangalam dam, for their channel ‘Hilltop Kitchen by PK brothers’. The videos begin with a panoramic shot of the dam, before Sebin collects twigs to get his stove burning, or plucks pineapples to rustle up some *halwa*.

These channels showcasing rural life in lush Kerala evoke nostalgia and are a clear hit with viewers. “Our viewers are mainly Malayalis based abroad who enjoy seeing the beautiful ambience, especially at the end of a long work day,” says Sebin.

Amjith S. of ‘Village Cooking - Kerala’ says Tamil channels (like Village Cooking Channel, which had Rahul Gandhi on as a surprise guest), helped make the idea of cooking outdoors popular. “We worked on that format to showcase traditional recipes and style of cooking in Kerala.” A video on a *pothichoru*—matta rice, beetroot *thoran*, potato *mezhukkupuratti*, coconut chutney, fish fry and an omelette all tightly wrapped in banana and areca nut tree leaves—has attracted over 1.2 million views. “Omana *amma* is a neighbour and relative. We grew up eating her delicious food,” says Amjith. His brother and the channel’s co-creator Abhijith suggested they shoot videos featuring her. “It took six months to convince her,” he says.

The P.K. brothers live on the hill where they shoot. This poses unique challenges—to get ingredients, they either have to walk or get a small vehicle like an off-road jeep, while dealing with unpredictable weather. They don’t necessarily stick to recipes from Kerala. “Our most popular video is on ginger beer which we, coincidentally, uploaded on the day the lockdown was imposed in Kerala,” says Sebin, who has worked in a hotel.

Village Food Channel, started by Firoz Chuttipara, 35, three years ago, has 4.27 million subscribers. “I think my Palakkad dialect and style of cooking made it popular,” says Chuttipara, who shoots in the village Chuttipara in Palakkad. He is a welder by profession and the skill comes in handy—in one video, he constructed a shawarma station from scratch to cook meat. His most popular videos show him cook *kumbalanga* chicken, *kuzhi mandi* and pigeon curry. Since Chuttipara cooks in bulk, the food ends up being distributed among villagers and in orphanages. ■

–Anu Prabhakar

A VILLAGE AFFAIR
(From left) Amjith S. and Abhijith S. with Omana *amma*; Sebin and Ebin P.K.; and Firoz Chuttipara

BOOKS

KILLING SNOBBERY SOFTLY

Anuja Chauhan takes a stab at the murder mystery genre and skewers elitism in the process

The romance in **Anuja Chauhan's** new novel looks like a horror-show parody

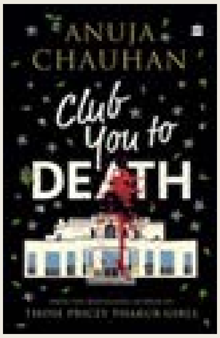
It's hard to say whether the characters in Anuja Chauhan's five previous novels were as loathsome as the ones in her newest, *Club You to Death*, or whether elite Indian society has simply become so cringeworthy that it is almost unbearable to look at its reflection in Chauhan's first murder mystery. Certainly it is simpler to overlook the prejudices and follies of the privileged of another era, for example 1980s Delhi, in Chauhan's *The House that BJ Built*.

Chauhan's protagonists are never morally uncomplicated: her heroines are often feisty and her heroes cocky, but to even refer glancingly (as some promotional material does), to this novel as a "romance" is wide of the mark. The only sympathetic character is kindly "Papa Bear" ACP Bhavani, an unlikely upstanding Delhi cop. The suspects—members and staff of the "Delhi Turf Club" (a stand-in for the Delhi Gymkhana Club)—are a selfish, limited lot. Even young hotshot human rights lawyer Kashi Dogra, a man most conflicted about his place in this social circle, is, to some extent, trapped within it. The novel opens with his parents' lament that Kashi isn't taking up his coveted permanent membership at the DTC, but there's a sense throughout the book that he might yet succumb—not only to the allure of the old club, but also his ex-girlfriend, club princess Bambi Todi. Romance in this novel looks like a horror-show parody—love reflected in a funhouse mirror. It almost seems like in this world there can be no other kind.

The novel is satirical, but humorous rather than pedantic or scathing. Chauhan's deftly worked caricatures are almost affectionately drawn, as she lightly lays bare the contradictions and complexities of Delhi high society. The stereotypes are familiar (see Ravi Shankar Etteth's *Killing Time in Delhi* for a similar cast) but distinctly memorable. At times the rendering into English of different registers of Hindi or Hinglish can be slightly jarring, though not inaccurate.

Chauhan's wit and way with words are as solid as ever, with plenty of laugh-out-loud zingers. The pace and plotting are also skillfully engineered with plot twists and slow reveals. These keep the novel engaging, while it remains difficult to invest in the redemption of any of the characters or their relationships. Chauhan writes about India's exclusive club culture from a place of love, maybe even nostalgia, yet as a new national order threatens the security of a centuries-old way of life, she makes no attempt to defend its elitist legacy either. ■

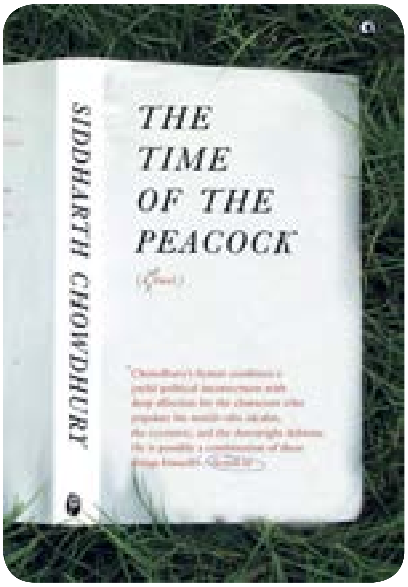
–Sonal Shah



CLUB YOU TO DEATH
by Anuja Chauhan
HARPERCOLLINS INDIA
₹399; 432 pages

THE MASTER HAS SOME MARGARITAS

FEATURING A DRUNK WRITER, SIDDHARTH CHOWDHURY'S SATIRICAL NEW NOVEL IS FUNNY AND PHENOMENAL



THE TIME OF THE PEACOCK
By Siddharth Chowdhury
ALEPH BOOK COMPANY
₹499; 136 pages

A friend recently remarked that Siddharth Chowdhury, whose fourth offering is a novella, *The Time of the Peacock*, is India's most underrated writer. Perhaps, instead, it's India's literary ecosystem that's overrated. Chowdhury's mind is like a glacier that is melting due to the zeitgeist. We readers are swept along in his torrent of words: fast but never hurried, the words are cleansing, and translucent so that the riverbed is visible. Each sentence carries so much imagery and information that you marvel at his craft. If a narrative propels you forward effortlessly, it is the mark of a great writer. Chowdhury does that.

There was recently also a mention of "Delhi" writing without a mention of Chowdhury. Amazing. A writer who follows a thread from a provincial capital (Patna) to Delhi University hostel life to the shattered dreams scattered around South or East Delhi—such a writer speaks for a significant chunk of Delhi, unlike some others. (Anuja Chauhan is another admirable Delhi writer in my opinion. Or the late Shovon Chowdhury, RIP.) Siddharth's last work was *The Patna Manual of Style* and the collection of his first three novels, Ritwik & Hriday. In his fiction, characters recur—Ritwik Ray, Hriday Thakur, Mira Verma, et al—and they return in *Peacock*. This is not to say there is a lazy avoidance of sketching new characters—indeed, each of Chowdhury's fictions can be read as standalone—but each character is reimagined as ageing, like wine. Each reflects, in their own way, a coming to terms with the great cosmic joke that God plays on us.

Briefly, *Peacock* is told in three acts, each through the eyes of a different character—John Nair, publisher of Peacock, a Delhi-based agency; Angika Raag, a backward caste writer on a writer's retreat in Scotland; and Ritwik Ray, the bard of Patna, whose new novel *Godse Chowk* is hanging in limbo at Peacock. They converge at a book launch in Delhi, where a drunken Ray threatens to show everyone his "Aadhaar card" by unzipping his trousers. However the three acts are not chronological. John's takes place two years earlier, Angika's shortly after the launch, and Ritwik's current story is where all the pieces come together. The centre is the end.

Peacock is not just a light-hearted look at Delhi's publishing scene (a "south Delhi industry", as literary agent Sukanya De puts it), but is also set firmly in our current era (a few weeks after the 2016 demonetisation) and thus a subtly political novel. (Peacock might be a play on Penguin, but it also refers to a bird that fondly roams the gardens of power.) So, the centre really is the end. Do read. ■

—Aditya Sinha

> **Apart from being a light-hearted look at Delhi's publishing scene, *The Time of the Peacock* is also subtly political**

An Uphill Fight

Released on a streaming platform for the first time, *Burqa Boxers* tells a rare story of grit and hope

(Clockwise from top) Coach Razia Shabnam; Taslima Khatoon; filmmaker Alka Raghuram; and Ajmira Khatoon

In *Burqa Boxers*, one of the protagonists rents a police uniform costume. She has realised that her dream of becoming a policewoman will remain just that, but she wants to live it out nevertheless. She gets photographs clicked in a studio while wearing the uniform. The scene delivers a punch to the gut as it establishes that the women in the documentary, like elsewhere, straddle multiple worlds that often collide with each other.

Alka Raghuram's 2016 film, which is now out on Cinemapreneur, a pay-per-view OTT platform, follows the lives of three female Muslim boxers in Kidderpore, Kolkata. "It shows how a group of feisty women and girls from a deeply traditional community try to change things in a way that's appropriate for them," says Raghuram over the phone from California, where she is based. "I had gone there expecting a story of a star athlete and instead found a more nuanced story of how stepping outside your comfort zone transforms you. Which, in their case, is boxing."

The boxers are Ajmira Khatoon, Taslima Khatoon and Parveen Shajda. The common thread that binds them is their fierce coach Razia Shabnam, India's first woman international boxing referee. Ajmira is, what one might call, a raging bull, determined to beat all odds. Taslima—who, at the time of filming, lived at a home run by the NGO New Light, which provides care for at-risk children and youth—is a feminist and often discusses discrimination against women with her friends. In class, Shabnam instructs students to keep their eyes open when someone tries to land a punch on their face. "There is wisdom in those details," says Raghuram. "It's about looking your fear in the eye."

Shajda, who has now quit boxing due to financial hardship, once saw it as a means to achieve her dream of getting into the police force. "In the abstract, it made no sense as to why the women would pick boxing. But boxing is one of the cheapest sports to pursue and they wanted to get into the government quota for athletes for jobs. It was a pragmatic step. To me, all this boxing towards financial independence, to assert their space in the society, was eye-opening," says Raghuram. "But it didn't play out for most of them because the system was not set up for them to succeed. In West Bengal, at least, they didn't have enough resources and facilities to become competitive enough to qualify for public sector jobs."

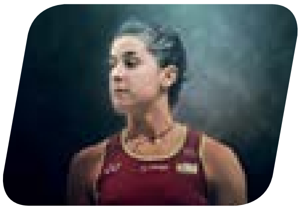
Raghuram spent four years shooting with the women. The filmmaker, who is currently working on a psychological thriller titled 'Ayna', about a boxer, declines to share details of the women's current whereabouts out of respect for their privacy, but says she is in touch with a few of them. "For Ajmira and Taslima, at this point, boxing is more of a passion that is not going to become something more because of lack of jobs." ■

–Anu Prabhakar

STAR POWER

Athlete A (2020)
NETFLIX
This documentary tells the story of how a group of intrepid reporters came to find that young gymnasts were being sexually abused by USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar.

Little Miss Sumo (2018)
NETFLIX
A 20-year-old female sumo wrestler dares to challenge the rules of the traditional sport by entering the ring herself.



Carolina Marín (2020)
AMAZON PRIME
The series follows the highs and lows of the former world No. 1's extraordinary career—the Olympic Gold medal win in 2016, a devastating injury and her comeback to the badminton court.

CINEMA

NOT SO SIMPLE A STORY

THE DOCUMENTARY *ALLEN V. FARROW* USES THE GUISE OF OBJECTIVITY TO STEP IN AS JUDGE AND JURY

Writing in *The New York Times* in 2014, Dylan Farrow asked how it was possible to continue to be a fan of Woody Allen's movies when confronted with the knowledge that he had sexually abused his adopted daughter when she was just seven years old. A new four-part documentary on the nearly 30-year-old scandal, *Allen v. Farrow*, asks essentially the same question. It puts the viewer of this documentary in the invidious position of having to either denounce and renounce Allen or be made to feel as if they are disbelieving a victim of sexual abuse because her father is privileged.

Despite the film's title, which suggests a court case in which both sides have their say before an impartial judge, it is effectively a prosecutorial exercise. The filmmakers are uninterested in balance, in putting forward any view that contradicts or even slightly dissents from the position that Allen was spared a criminal trial and probably conviction only by dint of his fame and influence. No one can question Dylan Farrow's right to tell her story, to speak of her alleged experience of abuse at the hands of her father. But *Allen v. Farrow* (available on Disney+ Hotstar) is manipulative precisely because it pretends to be something more objective than, say, Dylan's open letters in various newspapers. It puts pressure on the viewer to concede that the only ethically-correct choice is to accept Dylan and Mia Farrow's account of what happened one August day in 1992 without question. And that this same standard cannot be equally applied to the later claims by Moses, also an adopted son of Mia Farrow and Woody Allen, that Mia was an abusive parent from a troubled, dysfunctional family.

This is also the claim of Mia's adopted daughter Soon-Yi Previn. Mia found nude polaroids of 21-year-old Soon-Yi in 57-year-old Woody's apartment while Mia and Woody were still in a relationship and co-parents to several children, including Dylan. (Incidentally, Mia too was decades younger than her previous husbands, Frank Sinatra and Andre Previn, and Soon-Yi and Woody remain by all accounts happily married.) It was several months after Mia's discovery of Woody's infidelity with Soon-Yi that he was accused of sexually molesting Dylan. It is a sordid, ugly mess. But Allen was never charged with a crime. Official reports by state institutions argue both that 'probable cause' existed to charge Allen and that Dylan could have been either fantasising or coached by Mia to accuse her father.

In the wake of #MeToo, several actors have apologised for working with Allen, while others such as Cate Blanchett, Diane Keaton and Scarlett Johansson have been pilloried for not doing the same. In *Allen v. Farrow*, Blanchett's mild observation that Dylan's accusations are "a family matter" is offered up as a sort of acme of moral cowardice. But acknowledging that the truth is elusive, that sometimes we aren't in a position to judge, is preferable to the preening outrage of the makers of *Allen v. Farrow*. ■

—Shougat Dasgupta

A FAMILY MATTER? Mia Farrow holding baby Satchel (now Ronan) and Woody Allen holding Dylan Farrow

THE FORCE IS WITH HER

CLICHES DIE HARD BUT THE WOMAN POLICE OFFICER IS EMERGING AS AN AUTHENTIC CHARACTER ON SCREEN

Raveena Tandon in *Aranyak* (top); Aaditi Pohankar in *She* (below); Geetika Vidya Ohlyan in *Soni*; and Shefali Shah in *Delhi Crime*

In early March, Netflix India announced its slate of over 41 titles for 2021. As with television shows, a marker of success for a web series is its renewal for subsequent seasons. On that note, two particular titles stood out. Not so much for their high profiles—*Delhi Crime* is India's first International Emmy winner and *She* is created by Imtiaz Ali—as for their shared cultural theme. Both are long-form dramas spearheaded by women police officers. Another policewoman-led thriller, *Kamathipura*, was slated to drop on March 8, until Disney+Hotstar indefinitely postponed its release in a genuflection to the controversial new OTT guidelines issued by the ministry of information and broadcasting. The Netflix list also featured a supernatural series named *Aranyak*, starring Raveena Tandon as "a harried Himachali cop on a big-ticket case".

A decade ago, when Hindi cinema was blowing up with masala male-cop franchises like *Dabangg* and *Singham*, a female cop-led story was virtually unimaginable—let alone a sequel to one. The evolutionary process was perhaps fated to begin with a film called *Mardaani* (loose translation: "machismo"), a slick, entertaining YashRaj Films production starring Rani Mukerji as a brash crime branch inspector. But the beginning was far from perfect.

Despite their popularity, the problem with mainstream movies like *Mardaani* is their stubborn simplification of female authority. The complications of being a woman—in a male-dominated field, a marriage, a household—are eschewed to service the visual sensationalism of smashing the patriarchy. The protagonists derive a sense of agency by pretending to *be* their male counterparts. For instance, Mukerji's Shivani Shivaji Roy speaks a language—literally, figuratively—designed to compensate for the alleged limitations of the 'weaker sex'. In essence, Shivani's

feminism is a spiritual remake of the very masculinity she is paid to defeat. Ditto for Tabu's IGI Meera Deshmukh in *Drishyam* and Priyanka Chopra's SP Abha Mathur in *Jai Gangaajal*. The lens loftily frames them as superheroes, whose gender becomes more of a resolution than an ongoing conflict.

In comparison, the women of *Delhi Crime* and *Soni* are authentic for how they struggle to accept the contradictions of their identity. Their arcs reveal the futility of imitating male power in an environment notoriously hostile to females. *Delhi Crime's* Vartika Chaturvedi (Shefali Shah)—the DCP investigating the 2012 Delhi gangrape—is consciously playing the 'role' of a no-nonsense boss leading a squad of men. She only lets her guard down on brief phone calls with a husband who isn't emasculated to highlight her dominance. But the triumph of *Delhi Crime* lies in Vartika cracking beneath her veneer of performative stoicism. She often apologises for exhibiting emotions, wrestling with her inability to stay rational as she confronts the worst of male entitlement. Her young trainee (Rasika Dugal) refuses to acclimatise to this duality, opting out before it suppresses her natural being. Their equation is reflected in the award-winning *Soni*, where senior superintendent Kalpana (Saloni Batra) is torn between punishing and nurturing the primal impulsiveness—termed "recklessness" by male colleagues—of her hot-headed officer, Soni (Geetika Vidya Ohlyan).

But a subversive critique of old-school Bollywood's red-blooded perspective emerges in *She*. The show is centred on the sexual awakening of a young constable named Bhumika (Aaditi Pohankar), hired by the Anti-Narcotics Squad to go undercover as a prostitute to honey-trap a mysterious drug lord. *She* ends with Bhumika crossing over to the dark side—the implication being that the hypocrisy of an exploitative police force is far more toxic than the naked masochism of a gangster. Hers isn't a morality tale so much as a coming-of-rage arc. This premise doubles up as a scathing indictment of the male gaze of an artistic medium that, like Bhumika's employers, tends to objectify the body of the policewoman instead of wielding her mind.

It's another matter that the poorly executed *She* eventually succumbs to its own metaphor. Yet, despite the bumps in recent years, the fetishisation of uniform has slowly made way for the humanisation of form. Perhaps the marriage of the female cop with the female filmmaker is only the logical next step—one maintains the order, the other calls the shots. One protects life, the other recreates it. All that separates them is a camera. ■

–Rahul Desai

> The marriage of the female cop with the female filmmaker is only the logical next step

WOMEN ON DUTY

The mainstream heroine as female cop

Madhuri Dixit (*Khal Nayak*)
Bollywood without the undercover female cop is like *Khal Nayak* without Madhuri Dixit. There remains something iconic about her Inspector Ganga crooning "Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai", while pretending to be a street girl.

• • • • • • • •

Juhi Chawla (*One 2 Ka 4*)
Juhi Chawla effortlessly sways between the comedic cacophony of being a *Hum Hain Rahi Pyaar Ke*-style babysitter/lover and the sullen secrecy of being an undercover cop posing as the mega-villain's sultry squeeze.

• • • • • • • •

Sushmita Sen (*Samay: When Time Strikes*)
A rare pre-2010s female cop-led thriller, *Samay* stars Sushmita Sen in a gender-reversed version of David Fincher's *Se7en*–as a widowed ACP on the hunt for an unorthodox serial killer.

Q+A

THE HUMAN JUKEBOX

Not only is **Papon** multifaceted–he sings, writes and composes his own songs–he is also prolific. After releasing close to a dozen tracks last year, he recently released the earworm 'Main Aaj Bhi Wahin'

Q. You have collaborated with the likes of Karsh Kale and MIDIval Punditz in the past. Your new song, 'Main Aaj Bhi Wahin', also has a strong electronica influence. What draws you to that genre?
You will find traces of electronica even in my first Assamese album, released in the late 1990s, *Jonaki Raati*. I was exposed to electronic music in Delhi where I met MIDIval Punditz and started jamming with them. I have many unreleased electronic tracks. Only now did I think of putting this out.

Q. How different is playback singing from making your own songs? Do you have a preference?
Playback singing is out of my comfort zone because it is someone else's imagination. I have to make it my own and then give an output the composer wants. I have been lucky. I have gotten good songs which have helped me expand my repertoire and horizon.

Q. You released over 10 songs in 2020. Was making music your way of coping with the pandemic?
There is a lot more to be released. It took me a while to understand the impact the lockdown had on our lives. With no help from outside, my wife Shweta and I learnt how to manage the house with two little children. Once we got used to that, I was just making music in my home studio. There was no distraction, no travel, so I could be more creative.

Q. You've said that the lockdown made you a barber, gardener and cook. Looking ahead, which of these skills will serve you most in the future?
I became a housekeeping expert. I was an electrician, a mechanic and many other things. I enjoyed gardening because I love nature. I also have fond memories of farming with my father in our Guwahati home.

–With Kaushik Deka

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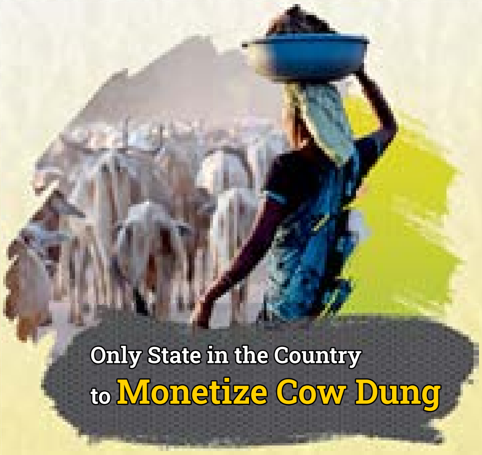
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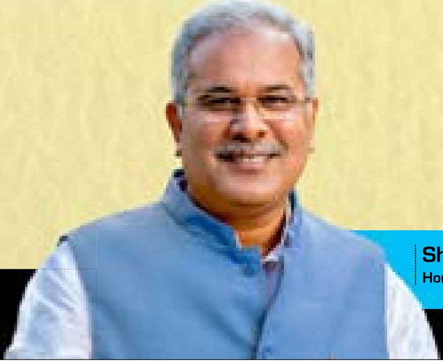
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